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OR, THE ONE-ARMED BOSS OF SHAKEDOWN CITY.

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CHAPTER I.

TOUGH AND TENDERFOOT.

SHAKEDOWN City had a new excitement. Several weeks had actually elapsed since the last one, and this promised to outlast it. Not that crime was unknown in the mining

THE TOUGH WAS DEXTROUSLY TURNED UPSIDE DOWN BY THE DUDE WHOSE COMPANION APPLAUDED HIM.

town in the heart of the Mariposa Range, for, indeed, it seldom was absent; but this mystery, this new food for talk, was so out of the ordinary that the people of Shakedown stood aghast at it.

A stranger had been found dead at the edge of the camp.

If he had quietly sat down and died at the foot of the rock where he was found by Alkali Tom, it would not have been so bad, or if he had staggered into The Comet and died of too much drink it would have elicited no comment; but he had been killed.

He was a man of middle age and strikingly handsome.

Everything had been done by the assassin to prevent identification, and there was nothing on the clothes or about the body that gave the slightest clue to the victim's name or home.

No one had ever seen him in the vicinity of Shakedown, no one had ever seen him anywhere, and the story of the foul deed held the whole camp in thrall.

It was the night after the finding of the corpse, which had been taken to Goldbug Dan's shanty at the end of the rambling street of Shakedown, and the lights of The Comet shone over its usual crowd.

The hour was seven and the stage from the east was momentarily expected to arrive.

It came in on time and drew up in front of the place as if The Comet was the proper place for all visitors to Shakedown to alight and become acquainted with the elite of the mountain camp.

On this occasion two young men stepped from the coach and came toward the retreat.

"Look thar! Two dudes, by Jove!" called out a large man in a mining shirt who leaned against the counter with a cigar between his fingers. "Now we will have a time, for sure. Just been waiting for something o' that sort to relieve the monotony o' camp life—"

"What's the matter with the stiff in Ben's shanty?"

"Oh, let him go! No one knows him and we must look to the happiness o' the livin'."

By this time the young men had closed the door behind them and stood in the glare of The Comet's lights.

They were quite young and were dressed in good clothes, black coats, well-creased pantaloons and carried monocles beneath the brims of their plug hats.

They appeared for a moment dazed at the sight which met their gaze, and the assembled toughs of Shakedown seemed as much surprised to face them there.

Both were athletic and no doubt agile, for their limbs were well rounded, and their faces expressive of intelligence and strength of character.

If they had any baggage they had left it in the stage, but they seemed to have entered The Comet with all their traveling effects.

"Just in time, gents," cried the big man. "Billy Whiskers, the Lorelie o' Shakedown, is about to give us a song."

This brought forth a laugh from the big man's companions, while the dudes tipped their hats to Billy Whiskers, who had been pointed out by the giant.

Billy was a consumptive little fellow whose head barely reached above the counter, and he glanced at his friends as he proceeded to clear his throat.

"What'll you have, boys?" he queried.

"A rattler, Billy. Give us 'Annie Laurie' or—"

"Give us the dickens!" cried the big man, who went by the name of Mountain

Kidd; "'Annie Laurie's' English, you know. Give something American—something like 'Sally in Our Alley' or 'The Miner's Last Dream.'"

Billy backed from the counter and cast a look round upon the crowd.

The two young strangers had stopped and stood close together while they prepared to listen.

In another moment a cracked voice was soaring to the rafters of the place and Billy Whiskers was putting his whole soul into "The Miner's Dream."

He sang with a good deal of gusto, and all eyes were turned toward the new arrivals to see what they thought of the songbird of Shakedown.

Lilly grew louder as he proceeded, but all at once his voice dropped to a plaintive sound as he told how the miner died dreaming of "home and scenes far, far away."

"Pass the hat for Billy, the Patti o' Shakedown," cried Mountain Kidd, taking off his hat and throwing it toward the singer. "Chip in lively, boys! Billy needs the cash, and he's savin' it all for funeral expenses."

This might have been true, judging from the pallid face of the singer, and as the "songbird" went round he bowed to those who threw something into the hat.

The two dudes were liberal. Both chipped in and added considerably to Billy's pile, after which one of them said:

"Mr. Whiskers sings very well."

"Mister Whiskers!" repeated Mountain Kidd, a look of disgust settling over his face. "Just think o' that! Say, Billy, don't you want my pistol?"

The singer shook his head with a smile, while the two youths got closer together.

"Mebbe you sing?" suggested Mountain Kidd, with a look at the pair.

"No."

"Nor drink?"

"Nor drink."

"Mebbe you're card sharps?"

"We are not. We're simply taking a look at the land out here."

"Dressed like Broadway dudes! It's a wonder that you've struck Shakedown."

The younger of the couple laughed.

"We've had a pleasant trip, so far. Indeed, we've enjoyed ourselves immensely. It was dry up at Briggs' City, so we thought we'd drop down here and take in the sights."

"Don't carry 'em off with you," warned Kidd, "because we may need 'em in the near future."

By this time a man who stood at one end of the counter, a rough fellow with an auburn beard and hazel eyes, had studied the strangers to his satisfaction, for, all at once, he strode from his place and stopped in the middle of the room.

"How did you leave your father, Bob Minan?" he inquired, looking straight at the two visitors as he spoke, but they did not start.

"You know that's your name," he went on, singling out one of the pair whom he covered with his finger. "It's just as easy for me to recognize you as to swim in a millpond. I don't purtend to know your pard, but you're Bob Minan's boy, for his face is yours and his eyes—why, drat it, boy, you've got everything he had!"

"Go a little slow, Larry. You're liable ter be mistaken, and if you ar' you'll have ter set 'em up—"

"I'll do nothing o' the kind! I know that young man. Bob Minan was whipped out o' Camp Rattlesnake three years ago for girl stealing—"

The face of the youth addressed by

the man with the blonde whiskers grew suddenly red.

"If you call my father Bob Minan and say that he was whipped out of a camp three years ago you lie!" he flashed.

"That's it!" shouted Mountain Kidd, always ready for a scrap if he was not to be the principal participant. "I told yer, Larry, that you'd git yer foot in it up ter yer boot-top. Go it, youngster! It's a free-for-all in Shakedown."

Larry felt that he had to do something to hold his own among the men of the mountain camp, for he sprang forward with his hands clinched and halted in front of the youths.

"We didn't come to Shakedown City for trouble," quietly said one of the pair. "You don't intend to make us fight before we're half an hour in town."

"If you say you're not Bib Minan's son, I do!"

The dude squared himself in anticipation of trouble with the Colorado tough, and the spectators gathered round to see the fun.

Larry looked again at the young man and took in his good clothes, which contrasted so strikingly with his own rough ones, but the next moment he began to dance on the floor like a pugilist.

He suddenly lifted one foot and sent it toward the dude's plug, the dirty toe of the boot just grazing the top of the tile.

"I'm a kicker from Kicker's Valley," cried Larry, hilariously. "I kin kick a squirrel out o' a pine's top. Just see me try the tile agin."

But before he could repeat his kick, which might have resulted in disaster to the dude's hat, the owner of the tile dodged toward Larry and suddenly caught him round the waist.

The tough's own hat was shaken off and rolled away, while the stranger lifted its owner from the floor.

This display of strength startled every miner in the house, and they seemed spellbound.

In vain did Larry struggle to release himself and to regain his footing.

He was dexterously turned upside down, and, to the surprise of all, stood on his head in the centre of the bar-room by the dude, whose companion clapped his hands applaudingly.

It was a scene never witnessed since the founding of Shakedown City, and Mountain Kidd did not know what to make of it. He was simply outclassed.

Presently Larry was released, and he righted himself with a very red face and a sheepish look.

He did not know what to do, for his comrades were looking chaffingly at him and he felt very mean.

"I stick to it!" he suddenly blurted.

The dudes exchanged glances.

"I stick to it!" repeated Larry, with emphasis. "He's Bob Minan's boy, an'—"

"We'll discuss that some other time, gentlemen," interrupted the young champion. "Just now we'll go to the hotel; I believe you call it the Hotel Eden."

"Yes, kept by Oregon Dave, turned dude in his old age. Won't you have a drink, gents, at my expense," and Mountain Kidd turned to order up the liquids.

"No, thank you. We'll be off. Will see you to-morrow. Oh, by the way, gentlemen, what's this story about the dead man in Shakedown?"

"It's true. Want ter see him, eh?"

"Not just now. To-morrow will do. Come, Ben."

The two sports—if such they were—passed from the place, but just beyond the door the vanquisher of Larry turned to his companion, and said in low tones:

"We've found the whole lot, Ben! Now, if we don't have our hands full I'm mistaken!"

"Keep cool. It all lies in that, Bob. Keep cool and watch."

CHAPTER II.

TWO AGAINST A TOWN.

The young men caused a flutter of excitement in the front room of the Hotel Eden when they entered it.

The proprietor, tall, gaunt and a man of muscle, looked them over from head to foot, and probably called them dudes under his breath, but Ben and Bob asked for the best room in the house and presently were shown to it.

As the Hotel Eden was on the opposite side of the street from The Comet they could get a view of the front door of that establishment from the one window of their apartment.

"Come here!" called out Ben, who had gone to the window. His comrade walked forward.

"The bees are gathering," assumed Ben. "That man who towers over the rest of them in front of the trap is your late antagonist, Larry."

"Yes, and near him stands Mountain Kidd. I don't see the sweet-singer of Shakedown, though."

"Billy Whiskers, eh? He could hide behind either of the pair and not be noticed. The storm is gathering, and before long we'll have more trouble on our hands. But for one I didn't come down here to back out of the bargain."

"Of course not. We are here to solve Shakedown's mystery and nothing short of a solution will satisfy me."

The declaration was echoed by the listener, after which the pair continued to watch the little group in front of The Comet in silence.

"If the body is still in Goldbug Ben's shanty we must have a look at it," averred Bob. "You know how the toughs looked at one another when I mentioned the murder, and how they seemed to dislike my reference to it?"

"I saw it all."

"Well, we will go down and take a look at the body."

"Now?"

"Yes, that will be better than waiting until morning. Besides, since we're in Shakedown, we might as well keep the place stirred up from the beginning."

In a few minutes the pards had passed from the hotel and were walking down the street.

They were seen at once by the group of toughs in front of The Comet and the crowd surged forward.

Instead of taking particular notice of the miners, Ben and Bob walked on, and at last halted before the last shanty on the street.

It was a little more pretentious in looks than its neighbors up the street, but was dark outside and inside, like them, and silence seemed to have cast a spell over the cabin.

"Thar's a dead man inside," said a harsh voice behind the dudes.

"Well, we have come to see him."

A figure came out of the shadows beyond the two callers, and a man loomed up.

"It's the dead man found near the white rock by Alkali Tom you wants to see, eh?"

"That's it. We want to inspect the unknown."

"Whar ye from? You don't b'long in Shakedown?"

"We came down on the stage."

"I thought so," and the speaker looked the young men over from head to foot.

"Can we go in there?" pointing at the hut.

"I see no objections. I'm not Goldbug Dan, who owns the shanty, but he won't care."

The door was pushed open, and the two young fellows passed in.

"Shut the door," said Bob to the miner.

The interior of the shanty was quite dark, but the caller struck a match and in another moment was looking down into a dead face resting upon a pillow on a rude cot in one corner of the place.

"Come here!" he called to his companion.

Ben came up and looked.

"We are right. It is surely the man!"

The other nodded, and turned suddenly to the door.

"Keep the crowd out for half a minute," requested Bob, as he bent over the silent form. "There, that will do. You can let them in now."

The voice of Mountain Kidd was heard. It sounded like the roar of a lion, and the figure of the Shakedown giant was seen at the door.

"Come out o' thar an' give an account o' yerselves!" he cried to the two pards. "It's after you we ar' just now. What do you want ter be cooped up with the dead man for? Who is he? Do you know? Come out an' give an account o' yerselves. This is Shakedown an' we, the cizerzens thereof, allow no monkeying without explanations in this camp."

Bob and Ben walked to the door and the crowd drew off as they stepped out.

In the calm moonlight that flooded the town at the foot of the mountain the whole scene was plainly visible, and over all stirred the boughs of the scattered pines.

"Stand thar—right agin' the shanty," Mountain Kidd went on. "We think you're up ter suthin'. It don't look right ter see you two sneakin' here ter get a squint at the 'find.' What does it mean?"

Bob stood nearest the mountain giant, and his fresh young face looked childish against the swarthy features of the other.

Kidd was backed by ten men, who looked like the typical desperadoes of mountain and gulch, though all were citizens in good standing of Shakedown City.

"If you know him, say so," from Kidd.

"We know him."

A murmur of excitement ran through the crowd.

"Then, who is he?"

"We'll answer that question later on," was answered. "We are not ready just now."

"You mean ter defy all Shakedown?"

"We don't intend to defy anybody. We simply do not wish to tell what we know."

"You want the murderer to escape?"

"Quite the contrary. We want to hang him."

"By keepin' silent?" laughed Mountain Kidd, and the men at his back joined in.

"We don't intend to do anything that looks to the escape of the assassin. The man in there was foully murdered, and his blood calls for justice."

"That's right; but you two dudes from the north can't avenge him by yourselves."

The last sentence was spoken in a contemptuous manner by Mountain Kidd, though the final word seemed to die in a whisper on his tongue.

"We'll see you to-morrow," contin-

ued Bob, walking off, his comrade at his back. "You men can find us at the Hotel Eden, but if you would rather see us elsewhere we will accommodate you."

"Why, that's the all firedest bit of coolness I ever saw!" exclaimed Kidd, looking after the well-dressed pair, now moving up the street.

"It's a fake—the hull thing," cried some one at his side. "D'ye think them fellars know anything 'bout the dead un? They're playin' a game just ter hoodwink us, an' by to-morrer thar won't be one o' them at Hotel Eden."

Mountain Kidd did not reply, but continued to gaze in silence after the two pards until their figures were lost in the shadows of Shakedown's hostelry.

After this Mountain Kidd opened the door of the improvised morgue and looked in.

"They didn't take the corpse, that's sartain," said he, with a grin. "It's the funniest bit o' business I ever saw in Shakedown. I'm for disciplinin' the pair. They're entirely too fresh for this neck o' the woods."

Which sentiment was cheered to the echo by the men behind Kidd, and in another minute the whole troop were walking up the street.

Arrived in front of the Hotel Eden, the crowd stopped and called for the strangers.

"It has come," announced Bob. "We must fight for our ground. This veritable hornets' nest is going to give us trouble, but not a foot backward must we go. It all depends on our nerve, Ben, and the keeping of our oath will make some one happy and others miserable."

The pards had retired to their room, which overlooked the main street, and had seen the crowd halt in front of the porch.

"You're wanted down here, gentlemen," said the red-shirted landlord, and then he dropped his voice a little:

"The boys seem ter be on the turf to-night an' you'll have ter handle 'em easily or thar'll be trouble. Don't cross Mountain Kidd unless you kin shoot as well as he. Give him latitude, for he's somewhat o' a boaster, an' soon cools down. Hasn't got half the grit o' Billy Whiskers!"

Having taken this advice in the spirit in which it was offered, both Bob and Ben descended the stairs and came out on the porch.

They were plainly visible from the street, for the uninterrupted moonlight fell upon the front of the hotel, and as they came forward all murmurs of conversation in the ranks of the regulators grew still.

"We want a true explanation, that's all," averred Mountain Kidd. "We don't tolerate mystery in Shakedown. We can't sit still an' see it abroad. In other words, gentlemen, we must know whar ye came from, who you are, an' who is the tenant of Goldbug Ben's shanty."

Bob looked over the crowd without betraying a shadow of paleness. The crisis had come, and he seemed to feel that the most important moment connected with their strange mission was at hand.

"I must repeat my words," said he. "I cannot disclose the mystery now."

There seemed to be a compressing of the crowd in front of the hotel, and the bearded ruffians of the Mariposa looked to Mountain Kidd for advice.

"That don't satisfy this crowd," said he. "It's not half a loaf—not even the crust. We don't move out o' our tracks till we've got the truth. I give you two one minute. If at the end o' that time you haven't told us all, or started the

true story, we'll discipline you after the manner peculiar ter Shakedown."

"That means the rope, gentlemen," whispered the landlord of the Hotel Eden, whose figure towered in the doorway behind them.

Just at this moment both Bob and Ben saw a figure cross the street beyond the crowd.

It was small and girlish, but it came on with startling swiftness, and all at once it sprang upon the porch and planted itself near them.

"The girl—old Bandy Nickel's heir!" cried Mountain Kidd.

"Bandy Nickel's heir! That's right, sir," cried the new-comer, as she strode down the porch. "Now, sneak home, every one of you, or I'll send moonlight through your carcasses. Go!"

She thrust forward two revolvers straight into the faces of Mountain Kidd and his men.

CHAPTER III.

THE WAIF AND HER PARD.

Bob and Ben looked first at the girl and then at the effect upon the crowd.

The mountain men stood like rocks in front of the menacing revolvers, but their faces showed some signs of fear.

Perhaps they knew the nerve of the young beauty of Shakedown.

They may have seen it tried on a previous occasion, and Mountain Kidd, with all his coolness, dropped his gaze.

"You are going, gentlemen, aren't you?" demanded the girl. "This isn't just the right thing to do—to follow these young men as if they were the assassins of the man found by Alkali Tom."

"They know the old fellow, though," said some one in the heart of the crowd.

"What if they do? I'm sure they don't intend to keep the mystery long, for they won't shield the murderer. I am Bandy Nickel's girl, and now that I'm left alone I don't want to make enemies of the men of Shakedown City. But you can't take these young men out and choke them up after your ruthless manner."

"That settles it," muttered one of Kidd's followers. "If the gal says so, why, we can't."

"Hold 'em level, Nelly!" cried some one across the street, and then a discordant voice was lifted in the last stanza of "The Miner's Last Dream":

"And they planted him down by the willows

Near the close of day;

And the stars shine on where he sweetly sleeps

Dreamin' his life away."

The sweet singer of Shakedown was over there, singing his favorite, and those who looked caught sight of his diminutive figure against a shanty.

Some one laughed, and Nelly smiled as she glanced across the street, but the next instant her face had been turned again to the crowd.

"Let 'em be till to-morrer," said Mountain Kidd, addressing those at his back. "We'll all be here, and we kin mete out justice as we please, then."

The girl on the porch looked at the men of Shakedown as they turned away, and in a little while not one of the number was to be seen.

Nelly came up to Bob and Ben, and offered them her hand.

"It's an exciting welcome to Shakedown City," she remarked, smiling.

"You happen to come at the most exciting time we've had in the last six months. There's a real mystery in camp,

and the boys are anxious to solve it. Perhaps you have caused them to think that you know something about the murder, and that's why Mountain Kidd didn't like it."

The young men looked into the well-chiseled face and fine hazel eyes of the speaker and the fine orbs seemed to droop a little.

"You live here?" queried Bob.

"Yes. Shakedown's been my home ever since it became a camp. I came here with Bandy Nickel, the old man who died last summer in the mine over yonder on the hill. It's not the nicest place in the world, but you see I've managed to get along fairly well and the 'city' suits me about as well as any other place would. Tough? Yes, a little; but they're all alike."

"Pardon me, miss; from what Mountain Kidd said you don't seem to be Bandy Nickel's daughter."

Nelly turned upon Ben, evidently surprised at his remark.

"That is true," said she, frankly. "I guess that's no secret in Shakedown. I am not the old man's child. I'm a waif—a bird without a parent, if you may say that. I can't give you anything about my history, for I have none to give. Bandy Nickel knows it all, and what he knows is the secret he's keeping to himself."

"You don't seem to have the enmity of the men of Shakedown, though you had to face them with the revolver to-night," intimated Bob.

"No. They take to me pretty well because I'm the only girl in camp, at present. I manage to get on with Mountain Kidd and his pards without serious friction. They're a tough set and some are a little tougher than the others. They're all pretty bad but Billy."

"The singer?"

"Yes. Have you heard him?"

"He sang for us to-night at The Comet."

"Did he? Well, there's something about Billy Whiskers that draws one to him. In the first place, he won't be with us long, and before many months there'll be a funeral over on the hill, and when we come back Billy won't be with us."

"He looks sad."

"He's not that way all the time. But, I don't want to detain you. You will have to look out while you're in Shakedown. As I've said, we haven't got a set of angels here. The murder of the stranger is the thing that unsettles us all now. Did I understand you to tell Mountain Kidd that you know the identity of the dead man?"

"We think we do."

"Heavens! That makes the situation all the more grave. If you know and won't disclose it, it only makes your sojourn in Shakedown the more perilous. There! I won't try to worm the secret from you," and the girl smiled again. "That belongs to you, and I believe you have some powerful reason for keeping it, just now."

"We have, Miss Nelly."

The girl moved toward the edge of the porch, but Bob stopped her just as she was about to leave it.

"Have you any suspicions?" he asked in lowered tones.

"Do I suspect any particular person of the crime? Is that it?" she asked.

"Yes; that is what I would know."

"I do, but let me have a secret as well as you for the present."

"All right, miss."

"Good-night, gentlemen!" and with this the girl turned away and walked down the street.

A little distance from the hotel she crossed the street, and the two pards saw another figure join her there.

"It looks like Billy Whiskers," said Bob to his companion. "She's a mystery like the one we've already found. Come. We'll try and get a little sleep to-night."

The young men turned into the Hotel Eden, where they found the red-shirted landlord waiting for them.

Oregon Dave was a typical tough, with his large face and bewhiskered cheeks, but he looked smilingly upon his guests as they came in.

"The gal's a hustler from way-back," he observed. "Did yer see how she faced the whole lot of 'em an' poked the guns inter their ugly faces? Why, when she used ter play in the street out there with her dolls, in the sun, with old Bandy on my porch lookin' on, I never thought she'd show grit like she showed to-night. But, it's in the blood. She inherited her pluck somewhar."

"You knew her from early childhood, then?" queried Bob.

"Yes; I remember the day Bandy came in and chucked the baby down in my lap. He got her somewhar up the range, that's what he said. Her mother died thar and the father ran off. That's the story he told an' we let it go at that. Bandy never lied; at least we never caught him in one. Pretty? Yes, Nelly's a beaut," and with this compliment Oregon Dave passed on.

Once more in their little room on the second floor of the Hotel Eden, Bob and Ben prepared to retire for the night.

Meantime down on the street in another part of Shakedown a scene somewhat different was taking place.

Nelly and Billy Whiskers were fitting through the shadows and were talking in low tones.

"I'm not afraid, Nell," averred the singer of Shakedown. "It's not that. I'll do anything for you, but you see the old mine always hurts my lungs."

"If you'll watch then, Billy, I'll investigate."

"You?" and the face of Billy Whiskers got a look of blank astonishment. "You go down into that hole? You let your life hang to a rope in that pit of blackness?"

"Why not? Hasn't the time come for something of the kind? Don't you know that the mine may give up its secret and the very one he kept so long? Didn't you see him come out of the old place the day he left me?"

"I did, girl—"

"Then Bandy Nickel's secret must be there!"

"I don't say it isn't."

"You'll watch, then?"

"I'll do more than that, Nell."

The two quickened their steps, and at the end of a few minutes, having passed beyond the confines of Shakedown City, Nelly and Billy Whiskers entered what seemed a hole in the mountain side.

It was as dark as Erebus beyond the mouth of this opening, and the pair felt their way along the wall.

"Here we are!" at length exclaimed the little man. "I can tell by the roughness of the stones."

"Where's the rope?"

"Here on this ledge."

"Strike a light."

Billy did so, revealing the roughened interior of the place and showing him the determined face of the girl mountain waif.

"How far down is it, Billy?" and the girl leaned over what seemed a bottomless pit.

"I don't know; never measured it. It may be a hundred feet or five hundred."

"Or not more than fifty?"

"I don't know, really, Nell. I'll find out."

"You?"

"Yes. I wouldn't let you go down for the world. Here, hold the torch right against the wall—that's it. I don't want to be fire-blinded, for I'll need my eyes after to-night, perhaps."

Billy Whiskers lowered himself over the edge of the pit and wrapped the rope, which had been secured to an iron staple in the wall, about his legs.

"All right?" he called back as he slipped slowly down.

"All right, Billy!"

In another moment the little camp-singer vanished, and Nelly of Shakedown stood alone in the corridor with the torch in her hand.

Seconds seemed hours to her as she listened for a sound from the little man beneath her.

She could see from the movements of the rope that he was still clinging to it. She hugged the wall and waited.

"He'll find it if it's there," she said, half aloud, to herself. "Billy is faithful to me, and he won't keep the secret to himself if it's down in the mine."

Then the rope hung quietly, and she could not detect the least movement in it.

But suddenly it began to quiver again—a little now, and then more, as if some person was coming up.

Nelly leaned forward, but suddenly fell back.

She saw a hand planted upon the edge of the pit and the next moment she was gazing into a face below it. And such a face!

Nell of Shakedown stood spell-bound, horrified, speechless against the bare rock, for it was not Billy Whiskers who had come up out of the black pit!

CHAPTER IV.

THE HERMIT OF THE MINE.

No, it was not Billy Whiskers, the sweet singer of Shakedown, who had come out of the dark depths of the old mine to confront Nelly, the waif.

The face which the girl's torch revealed was the face of an older man, and one which had in it so much of the strange and horrible that the belle of Shakedown shook like a leaf.

The deeply sunken eyes set in this face were wild-looking and ferocious; they glared at Nelly like the eyes of the tiger, and the trembling girl could only conjecture what had happened to Billy Whiskers in the pit.

The face did not remain long at the brink of the wall, for the waif of Shakedown, with suddenly assumed courage, seized the torch which she had thrust into a crack in the mine wall and sprang toward the apparition with it.

"Down! down!" she cried. "In the name of heaven, what are you—man, ogre or devil?"

There came from the thin lips of the wolfish face a chuckle, and the eyes snapped.

Nelly held the flambeau over her head and was ready to send it down into the grinning face.

"What have you done with Billy—Billy Whiskers?" she demanded. "Where is he? He went down the rope awhile ago and you—you came up in his stead. Speak! Where is my friend?"

"Where do you think, girl? Look down if you can. Don't be afraid. I'm human in spite of what you called me."

"Human? I can't believe it!"

Nelly leaned over the brink of the pit and tried to penetrate its depths with the light.

"You will have to go down and look for him. How's Shakedown?"

Nelly turned pale.

"Who are you?" she demanded once more. "You don't belong with us? You look like a half-starved wretch. Why are you in this old mine, which once belonged to Bandy Nickel? Tell me that."

"I tell you nothing. It is none of your business."

"I am Bandy's girl; so it is some of my business."

The man came up the rope to the top of the shaft again and looked curiously at the girl.

"You? Bandy's girl? You must be Nelly."

"I am—Nelly Nickel; and you? Be as fair with me."

"I am Samson."

"I don't understand."

"I am Samson Peters. Never heard of me, eh?"

"I never did, and now I see you for the first time."

"It's not strange. I am a queer man. But I never heard of you till I found the papers in the mine."

Nelly uttered a cry of eagerness.

"You found papers, did you?" she exclaimed. "You have discovered his secret, then?"

"It was an accident, miss. I didn't know they were down there; but I'm liable to turn up anything."

"Where are they—the papers?"

"Down there."

"Won't you bring them up to me?"

"Why not go down for them?"

"I will! I came here for his secret, and I am ready to go down after it."

"I'll descend first, and you can come down after me."

"Go down, then. I will follow!"

Nelly saw the man lower himself into the pit, and when a faint voice came up, telling her that he had reached the bottom, and that she might follow him, she placed the torch again in the crack and began to descend.

"I may find Billy Whiskers," thought the little woman. "He is down there. I cannot forsake my friend, and if this man plays me false, better will it be for him if he had never been born!"

The waif went down the rope with the agility of a practised sailor.

It seemed like a descent into the heart of the bottomless pit; but, her nerve did not desert her, and she soon stood on a ledge of rock.

A hand clutched her arm.

"This way," said the voice she had heard before. "You climb like a monkey, miss. Never saw anything like it. You beat Samson Peters. Ha! ha! ha!"

Nelly permitted herself to be led away, determined not to resist her strange guide, who had told her so much, and before long she was halted in a chamber as dark as the passage she had just traversed. The air was strangely pure, and she felt on her cheeks a breath of wind which seemed to be tintured with the odors of mountain pine.

"This is not the bottom of the mine?" questioned the girl.

"Bless you, no! It's only a half-way point. Let me show you. Now watch this match."

He struck a match, and threw it down. Nelly saw the little spark as it descended, twirling all the time, until it seemed to go out from sheer distance.

"He once told me that the Heart-of-Gold Mine was full of surprises which

he had never investigated," she said. "He did not seem to know the extent of his property."

"Of course not. He died suddenly, didn't he?"

"Yes, yes; terribly so!"

"What's the news over head—in Shakedown?"

"I will not answer! I want the papers first!" cried Nelly. "I won't tell you a word till you've placed them in my hands."

"You've got courage, girl. Not a word, eh, till I've told my story or handed you his secret?"

"That's it. Where is Billy Whiskers?"

"He's safe."

"But where?"

The hermit of the mine pointed toward the spot where he had thrown the match.

"Down there? I'll see first," and Nelly started toward the place, but the hermit jerked her back.

"Not yet. You don't know the way, girl," he said. "Don't risk your life. You're Bandy's heir, aren't you?"

"I am."

"And the richest heiress in Colorado. The mine's a bonanza, a reglar Golconda; but, more of this by and by. You want to see the papers? I don't blame you. They're marvelous!"

"You read them, did you?"

"Who wouldn't read such papers, sealed as they were and hidden where my fingers happened to stumble upon them? I tell you, girl, you don't know what I was looking for when I found them. That's my secret, too."

The man who had partly illumined the interior of the underground chamber with an improvised torch glided away and Nelly saw him drop on his knees in one corner.

There he seemed to thrust his hand underneath the wall, where it joined the floor of the cavern, and she held her breath until he rose again.

"I can't find them," she heard him say.

In another instant she was at his side and her hand fell upon his shoulder.

"You can't, you say? Come, Samson Peters, don't deceive me."

"I'm not. I'm telling the truth."

"Did you hide them there?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"It must have been three days ago."

"And they're not there now?"

"I can't touch them."

"Try again."

He did so, reaching his arm into the place as far as his elbow; but he withdrew it without the papers.

"It's the strangest thing in the world."

"How far back does the hole run?"

"As far as I can feel, at any rate."

Nelly looked down into his face again and scrutinized it closely. There was the seal of honesty in it, and she was forced to credit the story she had heard.

"What, then, was the substance of the papers?" she asked. "What did they reveal to you?"

"I'd rather you'd find them, miss," was the reply. "The man who stole them from me should be made to give them up, for they have been stolen I very well know."

The girl looked astonished.

"How do you know they were stolen?"

"God bless you, they're gone!" and the hermit of Heart-of-Gold Mine laughed. "I put them there, right under the wall, but I can't find them now. They've been stolen, I tell you."

"By whom? You have lived in this mine?"

"It's been my home for some time."

"You must have seen the thief, then. He must have left some traces of his visits to Heart-of-Gold Mine. Tell me what is this person like?"

Samson Peters shook his head.

"I never saw him in the mine," said he. "I only know what his track is like. I know he stole the papers. He carried off the secret which Bandy Nickell left hidden here."

"His track, then! I must see that. Where is it?"

"This way," said Peters. "But, just one minute. Be fair with me, miss. What has happened up there?"

Nelly told the story of the mystery of Shakedown, omitting nothing in the murder mystery up to date, and while she talked the hermit of the old mine stood with folded arms against the wall, his face a picture of eagerness and his mien attention.

"Who is the dead man?" asked Peters at the end of the narrative.

Nelly shook her head.

"The young gentlemen say they know, do they?"

"They say so."

"I don't know about that. Only this I know—a terrible time is brewing up there. There will be bloodshed in Shakedown. I have heard the mutterings of the storm."

"Heard them?" cried the girl.

"Yes. You don't believe me, but let me prove it."

Peters took the wail's arm and led her from the chamber into a narrow passage, dark and close.

In a short time they paused, and the hermit's hand pressed Nelly's cheek against the wall.

"Listen!" said he. "This is my telegraphic connection with the world up there. Isn't it marvelous? You can hear the toughs of Shakedown! Listen to that gruff voice like the growl of a wild beast."

Nelly drew back with a cry.

"It's the voice of Mountain Kidd!" she exclaimed.

CHAPTER V.

MOUNTAIN KIDD INTERFERES.

Bob Hanley and Ben Park were cousins.

Their fortunes had been interwoven from early life, and their companionship had increased with their growing years.

Blessed with a fair share of this world's goods, they had left home for the purpose of seeing the West, as well as to solve a little mystery regarded as of some importance in some quarters.

Active and fearless, they had gained some fame in the new lands where they visited, and the title of the Dandy Dudes had been given them by the miners of the West.

Just what their real mission is our story will unfold as it proceeds; suffice it to say now that they had come down to Shakedown on that mission.

The report of the finding of the dead man by Alkali Tom had reached their last stopping place, and with quick intuition they seemed to realize that Shakedown was the place for them.

The morning after the night of exciting scenes in the mining camp already detailed dawned fair and beautiful.

Bob and Ben were early astir, and walked out on the porch of Oregon Dave's hotel to breathe the fresh air.

They were noticed by a man who dodged around the corner of a cabin

across the street, and this individual seemed to take more than a passing interest in the new comers.

"I'll go an' see 'em alone," said he, and he came around the shanty and walked toward the hotel.

The dudes recognized him as Mountain Kidd.

He crossed the street and drew up in front of the Hotel Eden.

"Good-morning," said he, looking up at the two friends and cousins. "I thought we'd better have a private confab before the rest o' the camp catches on."

Bob leaned forward and answered:

"All right. I don't fairly understand you. I can't see why we should hold a consultation, seeing that our mission to Shakedown cannot interest the whole camp."

"Just so. It seems ter me that some one may have been a little fast last night, and I will just interview you a little. Shall it be here or in my shanty over there?"

"Come up to our room," suggested Bob, and Mountain Kidd sprang upon the porch, to be piloted to the room up stairs.

In the room the giant folded his arms and leaned against the foot of the bed.

"In the first place," said he, "the boys don't like too much mystery all at one time. You understand? The man in Goldbug's shanty was found dead at the white rock, an' they consider that mystery enough, till after the funeral, any way."

"After that you will try to sift the matter to the bottom?"

"Yes, that's the intention."

"You don't know the man?"

Mountain Kidd shook his head.

"There was nothing about the body that would identify it?"

"Alkali Tom found nothing."

"The murderer took away everything that would tend to identify the dead man?"

"I suppose so."

"That would be natural. Where is Tom?"

"He went away yesterday an' won't be back for a week."

"Where did he go?"

Mountain Kidd seemed to grow restless under this inquisition and plainly showed his irritation.

"See here," he suddenly cried, "I don't get to do much of the talkin'. You fellars do it all."

"Very well," answered Bob, with a smile. "Sail in!"

The camp Hercules seemed to increase an inch in stature as he took in a full breath.

He glanced at the door to make sure that it was shut, then he took a step forward and almost touched Bob's face with his whiskers.

"Did they send you down here ter investigate?" was his first question.

"Who?"

"I mean, did they send you down ter Shakedown ter find out all about the man's death? You came from the north you say—from the Doomed Camp?"

"You mean from Briggs's?"

"Yes. Did they send you—Captain Shadow and his pards?"

"We are not sent by Captain Shadow," assured Bob. "I can answer that question emphatically. We came from no detective agency. We are not detectives in that sense of the word, but we have a right to solve this murder mystery if we can."

"I don't dispute that right, but it seems to me that you've got your hands full."

Bob and Ben looked at one another and smiled.

"That may be, Captain Kidd, but we are here to ferret out the mystery. I know there are some men in Shakedown who will not care about giving us any aid or sympathy, but that does not diminish our zeal in this matter."

"No? Well, if Captain Shadow did not send you, and if you don't intend ter run across our path, you kin hunt the mystery all you please; but, be careful! This is Shakedown. No other camp like it on top o' ground."

"You mean that we must go so far and no further?"

"That's pretty much what I mean."

"You mean, then, that if we approach the solution of this mystery and if it involves some prominent citizen of Shakedown City we must give up the hunt at once?"

Mountain Kidd was silent.

"You kin infer what you think best from my remarks," he growled. "I can't explain. The dead man in Dan's cabin may have deserved the fate that overtook him."

"That will come to light by and by. He was foully murdered, no matter what he deserved, but we are not prepared to indorse your opinion of the matter."

Mountain Kidd backed to the door, with his face still turned to the young detectives, his eyes in a rage.

"You kin go too far in this case. We're a peaceful set o' men; haven't our like in the world when the fur is rubbed the right way; but rub it the wrong way, and see what'll happen! Good-mornin', gentlemen. We intend ter plant the Unknown this afternoon over on the hill."

He had opened the door by putting his hand behind his back, and in another moment had closed it again.

"The autocrat of Shakedown," said Ben, as he looked at his cousin.

"The storm centre," was the answer, while the heavy boots of Mountain Kidd sounded on the stairs. "We must prepare to meet this man in his own home. He is the head of the roughs of Shakedown, and it is with him that we must deal."

Down in the lower room they heard the voice of the giant as he talked in loud tones to Oregon Dave.

"Why did you give 'em room?" said he. "Don't you know the rules of the camp?"

"I know the rules that you made a year ago, but I am here ter accommodate the public."

There was a laugh, and the big man seemed to walk upon the porch.

"If anything happens through them," said he, in a voice of defiance, "if anything occurs ter mar the peace of Shakedown through the dudes up stairs, then the Hotel Eden will go up in smoke."

"And the man who makes the first move will never live to complete it," was the reply, and the voice of the landlord died away.

Kidd strode across the street, but glanced up at the window of the cousins' room and seemed to grit his teeth.

The rising sun shone upon his giant frame and his broad-brimmed hat, with the rattlesnake band, and he tossed back the long hair which the cool, crisp breeze blew into his face.

Bob and Ben descended, and entered the bar-room of the Hotel Eden, where they found Oregon Dave quietly cleaning a formidable revolver.

"I guess you've got me inter trouble," he remarked, with a smile, as he looked up and greeted his guests.

"We hope not."

"Mountain Kidd isn't in the best o'

humor this mornin', and he said some things he may have ter take back before night."

"About your house?"

"Not particularly about the ranch, but concernin' other matters. There's liable ter be a picnic before the funeral, and some more graves may have ter be made on the hill."

With this the landlord pursued his task, and Bob and Ben looked on.

"When did Mountain Kidd come here?" asked Bob.

"Two years ago."

"Where from?"

"That's his secret. We never could find out, but all I know about his past is a few words which Billy Whiskers once dropped."

"What were they?"

"He talked about a price set on a man's head, and he mentioned Mountain Kidd's name in the same connection."

"Where is Billy, the sweet singer?"

"In his shanty, p'raps. It's the third one from the end o' the street to the right of the hotel."

"Come," said Bob to Ben, and the two passed out.

The cabin designated by Oregon Dave was not hard to find, and they entered.

It was untenanted, and they stopped just inside the door.

The cot that faced them had not been slept on the previous night, and nothing went to show that Billy Whiskers had been there since they saw him last, with Nelly, on the street.

"Not at home," observed Bob.

"Nor has he been here for some time," was the reply. "The song bird of Shakedown may have left his cage for good."

Bob Hanley crossed the little room and had put his hand upon a rough shelf at the wall, when the door was flung open and the camp giant stopped at the threshold.

"Nosing around already?" said Kidd, in whose hand was gripped a six-shooter. "This is carryin' things with a high hand in Shakedown. Stand away from that shelf! Touch it and I'll send sunlight through you with a forty-two."

Up came the revolver, but another weapon clicked and Ben Parks covered the tough with a weapon almost as large as his own.

"Hands down, Mountain Kidd!" warned the Dude Detective. "Hands down or a bullet in your head! Take your choice!"

The desperado had found his match and seemed to realize that he had blundered.

CHAPTER VI.

FORCED INTO EXILE.

Undoubtedly Mountain Kidd had reckoned without his host.

"What is it?" demanded Bob. "You don't guard this cabin, do you?"

"No, not exactly; but, you see, Billy is a friend o' mine, and I don't like ter see his things disturbed."

"No one intended to disturb them. I was just going to look if the sweet singer of Shakedown had left any reason for not occupying his bunk last night."

"Then look."

Bob turned again to the shelf, but found nothing on it to reward him.

Mountain Kidd, with glowering visage stood in the door, his revolver still clutched in his hand and his face aflame with rage.

"You two gentlemen don't expect to do as you please in Shakedown?" he blurted.

"Not at all."

"In the first place, you come here with a story that you know the dead

man in Goldbug's cabin. You won't tell us, but keep the secret to yerselves. We can't tolerate this kind o' thing here. We won't, that's all."

With this the big bully withdrew and the cousins looked at one another in silence.

As Mountain Kidd left the cabin a wild shout was heard, and through the door which he left open Bob and Ben looked down the street and saw a man, well mounted, as he drew rein in front of the Hotel Eden.

The Two Dudes stepped to the door and looked at the new-comer, whom Mountain Kidd was eyeing with a good deal of intensity.

The giant of Shakedown had stopped a few yards from Billy Whiskers' shanty. He still held the revolver in his bronzed hand, and his body was bent forward in intent interest.

"Who is he?" involuntarily asked Ben.

"Time will tell. Some wolf of the sort we are dealing with, I suppose."

They walked toward the horseman.

He was a man rather stockily built and dressed in rough mining garb, a red kerchief about his neck, and over his shoulders a lot of reddish hair.

He stood almost straight in his stirrups, his large bronzed face showing clearly in the sunlight, and his deep set eyes looking down the street where the figure of Mountain Kidd was outlined against the cabins.

"Hurrah for Jerusalem Jake!" he shouted, as if in defiance to the man-wolf who was watching him.

Mountain Kidd stepped a little nearer.

The man on the horse took off his hat, which act let loose all his leonine locks, and he seemed to straighten an inch in the heavy stirrups.

"Death ter the wretches of the Mariposa!" he exclaimed, swinging his hat round his head. "You can't hoodwink Jerusalem Jake all the time, not quite, ha, ha, hā!"

By this time Mountain Kidd was not the only person who had noted the stranger's arrival.

One-half of the camp's populace had swarmed from their shanties and were looking at what they felt would be a bloody meeting.

Jerusalem Jake did not seem to be armed; indeed, he did not wear a belt of any kind; but his mien was courageous and he settled down in the saddle with the ease and grace of a Comanche.

In another moment he sprang to the ground and threw the bridle reins over the neck of his sorrel.

As he did so he strode toward Kidd and suddenly lifted his hand.

"So you're here yet," he said contemptuously. "I half expected to find you food for the buzzards an' wolves, but they've spared you, have they?"

"They've spared me," answered Kidd. "And you? What brings you from your retreat?"

"Vengeance! Whar's the last victim of the murderin' hands o' Shakedown?"

"Down yonder in Goldbug's shanty."

Jerusalem Jake walked toward the cabin, his horse following like a dog, and all looked in amazement at the little man who had dared the autocrat of Shakedown.

All eyes followed him down the street and the cousins watched him with more than passing interest.

They saw him stop in front of the shanty that contained the still unburied corpse of the man found dead by Alkali Tom, and not until then did he look back at Mountain Kidd.

The stranger's steed half shielded him, but Mountain Kidd saw him all the same.

Jerusalem Jake opened the door of the cabin, and looked inside.

As he did so the hand of Mountain Kidd was lifted and the shrill report of a six-shooter followed.

The bullet struck the door and buried itself in the wood. It was the autocrat's challenge to Jerusalem, but that worthy did not seem to heed it.

Several minutes elapsed ere the door opened again and the figure of the new-comer came out.

He looked up the street and saw Mountain Kidd still standing in the highway.

The two enemies faced one another, and the man from abroad walked coolly forward.

The crowds along the cabins looked at this scene with varied emotions.

"Hands up!" cried Jerusalem Jake, as he approached.

Mountain Kidd did not move a muscle.

"Hands up, Mountain Kidd. It is not Jerusalem who speaks this time. It is the Gold Butterfly!"

There was a start on the other's part, and those who looked closest saw a palor sweep over the giant's face.

"Hands up!"

It was the third time, and the hands of Mountain Kidd were lifted above his head.

"The coward!" said some one in the crowd along the cabins. "Is Mountain Kidd mad?"

"He is afraid. He knuckles to the madman from the south. Mountain Kidd shows the white feather."

To these remarks the giant made no reply. He looked into the face of Jerusalem Jake and seemed to see another image there.

The stranger stepped nearer and held out his hands.

Mountain Kidd hesitated a second, and then seized them, while he stared and glared at their owner, in whose eyes burned a strange, wild light.

"Shall I proclaim it?" demanded Jerusalem Jake.

"You may."

"It will exile you."

"I don't care."

"It will make you a vagabond on the face of the earth."

"Perhaps; but I'll take keer o' number one."

"Once more, Mountain Kidd; where is she?"

"Dead."

"You swear it?"

"Yes."

"And where is the other?"

"Dead."

"You swear that, too?"

"Yes."

"And the child?"

"I don't know!"

"Upon your solemn oath?"

The Shakedown giant hesitated, but asserted that he spoke the last words on his solemn oath.

The hands of the two men parted, and Jerusalem Jake stepped back to turn suddenly upon the men of the mountain camp, who had watched everything in silence beyond their first remarks about Mountain Kidd's cowardice.

"Men of Shakedown, listen to me," he cried in loud tones. "I am going to tell the truth, let it hurt whom it may. It is my mission to speak the truth wherever I go, and you shall hear it now. Mountain Kidd is Pinos Jack, the highwayman of the Silver Hills. He is the man upon whose head there is a standing price, and on whose hands is the

stain of twenty crimes. I have proofs of this. I have them in my bosom, but the man himself will not deny it. Ask him."

All eyes fell upon the giant, whose head had dropped upon his broad chest and whose breath seemed to come in gasps as he faced his accuser.

"He is silent. Is it true, Mountain Kidd? Remember!"

The last word was uttered in a voice which did not reach any ears but Mountain Kidd's, and it swept his heart like a storm wind of passion.

"Speak to your pards of Shakedown," continued Jerusalem Jake. "Is it true?"

The big man looked up with an effort and took in the scene before him.

"It is true," said he.

"Pinos Jack is doomed wherever he is," went on Jerusalem Jake. "He is the property of the law, the righteous victim of vengeance. He belongs to fate, and any man can shoot him down and not suffer the consequences."

"Let them try it!" hissed the doomed desperado. "Let them try to carry out the old sentence. I am here."

Once more the mountain tough was himself, and he stalked forward, his hand wound about the butt of his revolver and his face the picture of fury.

"In other lands and by other shanties I will meet my foes," he went on. "As for the accusation you have heard, I am Pinos Jack, but also Mountain Kidd. I am the highwayman of the Silver Hills, but still the iron man of Shakedown!"

A cheer greeted him.

"Mountain Kidd will see the mystery of Shakedown solved. He will demonstrate that he is still a power among the Mariposa Hills. He will face dude and desperadoes with the coolness he has ever maintained. The man does not live who can beat Mountain Kidd out of his hand. He is the king of the hold-up—the same man he was years ago in other lands."

The outlaw, defiant and dauntless, walked away.

His face was turned toward the end of the street, and the Two Dudes watched him as he came toward them.

Suddenly there rang out the sharp report of the revolver; the terror of Shakedown spun half-way round and fell forward on his face.

"We have lost the game," said Bob Hanley, and his pard looked at the form in the dust without comment.

Jerusalem Jake had fulfilled his mission.

CHAPTER VII.

TWO BULLETS AND A BROKEN WINDOW.

Not long after the tragedy of Shakedown in which Mountain Kidd fell before the pistol of Jerusalem Jake, Nelly Nickell entered her little shanty, the neatest in the camp.

She had come up out of the Heart-of-Gold Mine after encountering its hermit-tenant, Peters, and now came back to her own dwelling a little too late for the funeral on the hill, and too late, also, to witness the meeting of the bravo of Shakedown and his accuser.

But the girl was not permitted to remain long in her cabin unvisited.

The shades of another night were deepening over the camp among the hills and the patrons of The Comet were gathering in.

Nelly turned, as her door was opened, and stood face to face with Bob Hanley.

"I have been waiting for you," explained the young man. "You went away last night."

"Yes. I have had some strange adventures. I have come back armed as I have never been armed before."

"Armed in what way?"

The lips of the girl seemed to quiver.

"I have lost Billy Whiskers; but, more of that anon," she went on. "I have stood face to face with the dweller of the old mine. I have seen Samson, the hermit of the drifts. He discovered Bandy Nickell's papers only to lose them again. I have come back to find the thief."

"The man who stole the papers, miss?"

"Yes, and I think I know him."

"Where is he?"

"In Shakedown. I want to face him. The papers belong to me."

"Why to you?"

"Because they were left for me by Bandy Nickell, my guardian. He hid them in the mine and then died suddenly. He never got to tell me where they were, but the hermit of the mine found them."

"And lost them in turn, you say?"

"Just so. What has happened here since I went away? They haven't called you and your friend to account yet?"

"Not yet."

Bob then acquainted the girl with the events which followed his last adventure at the Hotel Eden, the coming of Jerusalem Jake, the accusation and the attempt on Mountain Kidd's life.

"He lives, you say? This man still lives despite Jerusalem Jake's aim?"

"He lies in his own shanty—alone."

"I must see him."

"Not alone, miss."

"Let me go by myself. This man is no longer a mystery to me. I know all about him. I would have known without the accusation, for the papers found and read by Samson tells me all."

She was at the door when the hand of Bob Hanley gripped her arm.

"Mountain Kidd, though now off the roster, is still here in others," said he. "His death will only knit tighter the bonds of such men as Larry and Mariposa Morg. Then, there is the veritable ruffian Gold Nick, and one-armed Orson. All these, I believe, intend to stand by Mountain Kidd's cause to the last. The dead man is buried. He sleeps on the hill, and they are talking now of turning on us and Jerusalem Jake."

"On you and your friend?"

"Yes; they understand our mission."

"If they do you must fight."

"We will, of course."

The belle of Shakedown fell back a step and looked into Bob's face.

"In case of a fight you will be almost alone," she assumed.

"I know that. The camp will stand by Mountain Kidd."

"It will. He has controlled the fortunes of Shakedown too long to be deposed by a man like Jerusalem Jake. Where is the avenger now?"

"He left Shakedown soon after the shooting. He did take advantage of Mountain Kidd, but his pistols so covered his retreat that he got off unscathed."

"No one even interfered?"

"None did."

"Then the storm will break to-night. Couldn't you and your friend go back? The stage will go up inside of an hour."

"We did not come down here to be run off," was the reply. "You forget that we have a mission."

"No, no. It is to discover the murderer of the stranger found by Alkali Tom."

"That's it, and more. After the discovery comes the most delicate part of our work. I cannot tell you more now. The hand that killed can and will be found. We are on the trail now. We have a clew."

"One which you never will be able to carry out in Shakedown," cried Nelly. "If you will remain I will be your friend, but if you fail remember Nell must not be blamed for it."

"Never fear."

Bob saw the girl walk through the deepening shadows toward Mountain Kidd's shanty and watched her until she reached the door.

"Young un?" said a voice behind him, and Bob started as he looked at the speaker.

"Look yonder," continued the man, his hand pointing toward the door of The Comet. "Thar's death across those steps—death for you an' your pard!"

Bob looked a moment without again gazing into the stranger's face.

"That's Orson the one-armed," continued the other. "You don't know him?"

"No, but I have seen him with the rest."

"Watch him. See what he does. He is full of tricks."

The man who had emerged from The Comet stepped to one side and seemed to take something from his pocket; then he leaned against the shanty and began to write on a bit of paper.

"He sees in the dark as well as he does at noonday. They call him Orson, the Owl."

In a few moments he straightened and folded the note.

"Follow him—with your eye," advised the man at Hanley's back. "He won't be gone long. Orson has a post-office which is not much known."

The man under surveillance suddenly stopped and dropped to the ground. Where he knelt was a large stone. Under this he thrust his hands.

"The note's thar now; Orson thinks he has not been observed. Would you like to read the missive?"

"I would like to read it."

The stranger sprang away the moment the figure of Orson re-entered The Comet and Bob Hanley waited for his return.

"Here it is. Now go into the girl's shanty and read it to your heart's content."

The young detective entered the girl's home and struck a light.

The paper was a rough bit and the writing had been traced under adverse circumstances, the writer being one-armed and uncouth in orthography, but he mastered every word:

"The time has come," wrote Orson, the Owl. "The hand must be played out before morning. When you get this don't delay, but sharpen the tools and meet me, you know where. Let it be not later than three. They will be asleep then, and Shakedown will be quiet. The Unknown is buried and all is well. Now for the great play. We have no one but two young chicks from the north and a few others to fight. It won't be much of a battle. So come on when you find this. THE OWL."

Young Hanley read this startling message twice before he ventured to look around, expecting to see the stranger near at hand; but he was alone.

He stepped outside, but the stranger had departed, and with the note in his hand he stood there nonplussed.

He waited several minutes, and then, folding the message, he turned toward the Hotel Eden.

Ben was there, and he would show it to him.

Bob went up stairs and found his cousin at the window, but before he could show the message there came a cry from Ben.

"Across the street yonder!" he ex-

claimed. "Look! It creeps on all fours like a panther, hugging the ground. I have been watching it for five minutes. It moves back and forth before the shanty across the way. There! It has stopped now!"

Bob saw a dark object on the ground and against the hut over there, but he waited to see it move again.

"I see it now," he said. "How long have you seen it, Ben?"

"For five minutes at least. It seems to be watching our window. Ah! look! It has risen, and I see it standing against the logs. It is a man."

Bob Hanley instinctively drew his weapon, and he stepped back from the window.

"Look out!" suddenly cried Ben. "He is going to shoot!"

The instant report of a pistol was followed by the shattering of a pane of glass.

The bullet whizzed between the two heads, and struck the wall beyond, littering the floor with fine dust.

"The mean assassin!" cried Bob, springing to the window and looking out. "He is there yet. Does the villain court death? Bullet for bullet! He shall get as good as he sent!"

But Ben seized his pard's arm and drew him back, and just in the nick of time, for a second bullet broke another pane, and pierced the wall.

"Wait! I'll meet him on even ground!" exclaimed young Hanley, as he leaped for the door and cleared the steps in four bounds.

He was on the porch in another instant, and then in the middle of the street.

Over against the shanty stood the figure, and the young man from the north advanced with lifted revolver.

"Hands up!" he cried. "Hands up, or death at the trigger!"

There was no reply, nor did a pair of hands move upward; the person on the sidewalk was as statuesque as a human being could be.

With a bound Bob Hanley landed on the sidewalk, but only to be confronted by—nothing!

The man was gone—had vanished as a shadow!

CHAPTER VIII.

IN HEART-OF-GOLD MINE.

Deep down in the Heart-of-Gold Mine stood Samson Peters, its hermit tenant.

The strange man's form was barely outlined against the grim wall upon which fell the light of the little fire that burned in the middle of the subterranean chamber.

With his singular face seamed with the melancholy of a real hermit, and his brawny arms half bare, Peters looked like an underground ogre.

His head was bare; indeed, it was always so, and his tall figure caused him to look still taller in the weird light.

Samson had just come back from a trip to the upper world.

The inmate of Bandy Nickell's mine had just come from Shakedown; he had walked the streets of the tough town, had talked with Bob Hanley, only leaving the young man when he retired to Nelly's cabin to peruse the letter left under the stone by Orson, the one-armed.

"The boy will find that letter interesting; I know that," chuckled Samson. "Trouble's brewing up there and the wolves of the Mariposa will devour each other. But there's the man found by Alkali Tom. They don't know who he is, nor who killed him. But I know!

It's my secret! Mine until I want to reveal it!"

Samson started, as if a suspicious sound had struck his ears. He passed to the entrance of the chamber, looking along a dark drift or passage, his eyes all aglow with excitement.

"Was it the thief? Is he lookin' for more papers?" he mused.

Presently there came down the rock-ribbed corridor a light footstep.

Samson drew back in the gloom, ready for a spring.

Some one stopped at the drift's entrance; then the hermit sprang upon the intruder and in a moment more had dragged his victim forward into the chamber.

"Sneakin' back, eh?" cried Peters, as he beheld in his iron grip a man of darkish face and well-knit figure. "Whar is it?"

"Whar's what?"

"You know, the papers!"

"What papers?"

"The ones you stole."

"I stole no papers."

"Hand 'em over!"

"I have nothing to give up. I did not take any papers. I am not here to steal."

"But, this is my ground. This place is in my possession."

The man drew back and eyed his captor sharply.

"You've been here some time, haven't you?" he asked.

"Perhaps; that's my business, not yours."

"You're hidin' here in the Heart-of-Gold Mine that used to belong to Bandy Nickell."

"Yes, it used to be Bandy's; it belongs to his young heir, now—to Nelly."

"To Nelly? Then why isn't that known?"

"They won't let her take possession because thar's no will; at least, the one Bandy left hasn't been seen since I put it away."

"Where did you put it?"

Samson pointed toward the place where he had stored the papers found in the mine.

"It's not thar now," he went on. "Some one stole the package, an' if I thought your hand took it off, I'd choke you to death!"

"I did not take it, though I would like to look at the document. You don't know me."

"No; that I don't!"

"I am Jerusalem Jake."

The name did not seem to produce any excitement in Samson Peters' manners.

"I came hither on a mission that may interest you," continued the man. "In the first place, we ought to be friends, for Nelly's sake."

Samson held out one of his hands.

"We are friends," said he. "I bid you welcome to the Gold Hermitage, Jerusalem Jake, if you are her friend."

"I came hither on a singular mission. Already part of it has been carried out. I shot Pinos Jack up there."

"Well?"

"I met the man upon whose head a price has been set for years. I told him in the presence of Shakedown who I was and then exposed him. He confessed the crimes of the past by saying that he was Pinos Jack instead of Mountain Kidd. but, at the same time, he was defiant. I am the high sheriff of San Baboo. I am also the avenger of more than one crime."

"You killed him, did you?" asked Samson eagerly.

"No. He is up there gasping for the

little life I left in his carcass. But, enough of this, Samson, I have another mission. The whole camp is in a turmoil. Orson, the One-armed, is looking for the others, perhaps to-night."

"He left the letter under the rock, but one of the young dudes found it."

"One of the boys who came to Shakedown the other night?"

"Yes."

"They will be swept away in the storm," assumed Jerusalem Jake. "They can't face the toughs of Shakedown and live. And yet they say they are here to avenge the death of the Unknown."

"I know that."

"If Kidd lives or dies it will be all the same. Shakedown is doomed. The girl is in the very heart of the whirlwind of death. There is but one avenue of safety for her and her champions, for the youths are such."

"What is that one way?"

"Years ago I came to this mine, with its owner, Bandy Nickell. I was shown the secret places in the dark passages and the hidden trails from room to room. You must know them all since this is your home."

In the light of his fire a smile came to Samson's face.

"I know a good deal about the Heart-of-Gold Mine, but you may know more."

"You know where the little passage is—the one with the ceiling covered with sharp stones."

"I do not."

"Then you don't know all there is to find out about the place you inhabit," declared Jerusalem. "We'll look into the secret passage by and by. I want to know, now, about the papers. Who would want them?"

"Orson, the One-armed, for one."

"Yes, Orson and his pards. The will was among the papers, was it?"

"It was there, and other papers that would create a sensation up in Shakedown."

"Was it a confession?"

"Yes, the story of two lives."

"I thought so," said the other. "You read them carefully, the will and the other documents?"

"I read them," answered Samson. "It is a strange, a marvelous, story. It would interest more than you and me."

"Wouldn't the papers throw some light on the identity of the murdered man?"

"Aye, that they would!" exclaimed the hermit. "They would bring to light the secret of his life; they are the very papers the boy detectives would like to have."

"We ought to find them."

"They can be found. If you go up there, seek the shanty at the end of the street."

"The street has two ends, Samson."

"Yes, but the shanty I refer to is not the one where the body laid."

"I understand. You mean Orson's nest?"

"Search that," cried Samson. "I did not, when I was up there awhile ago. I came down to my nest after meeting one of the boy ferrets and finding Orson's message for him. Search Orson's cabin and you may find the stolen documents. No man has a foot like Orson, the Owl. I saw its marks in the dust here. He is the thief. He steals for himself and for others. Without the will and the papers the girl becomes a pauper."

"And the dead man will go un-avenged."

"That's it—unavenged! The papers will arm the boy dudes from the north."

How do they come to know his identity?"

Jerusalem Jake shook his head.

"You must not ask me that question if you expect an answer," said he. "I am in the dark, there. But, I am here to play out my hand. I will become Nelly's ally, if necessary."

"Shake!" cried Samson, again extending the hand. "She may need you, after all. The young men can't stem the tide. They dare not arrest the man who killed the Unknown."

"They will try it. They are grit to the backbone."

"That is true, but Shakedown stands by Orson and his friends. It will not let the boys interfere."

Jerusalem Jake took a short, nervous turn about the underground chamber, and came back to where Samson stood.

"Now for the secret passage!" cried he. "I've been thinking. If you can point out the way which is half blocked by a huge rock I will do the rest."

"Come, then. I know where that is," and Samson started away, followed by his visitor.

In a few moments the hermit of Heart-of-Gold Mine called out:

"It is here!"

Five minutes later the hermit was the astonished one of the two.

Jerusalem Jake had led him to a part of the mine he had never explored!

"Where does this way lead to?" he asked.

"Don't you know? It takes one to the cabin once occupied by Bandy Nickell."

"Why, Nelly lives there."

"In ignorance of the secret," assured Jerusalem Jake. "You can creep up and up until you halt right underneath the floor of the girl's room. That is the secret Bandy imparted to me, because years ago I did him a favor."

The hermit looked his amazement, but seized his visitor's arm.

"She may not be in," said he. "If not we can search Orson's shanty for the papers. Why not?"

"We will. Those papers must be found. Everything depends on finding them. It breaks the power of Orson the Owl and perhaps saves the lives of the rash boy detectives of the Doomed City."

Presently both Jerusalem Jake and Samson were threading the dark passage which led upward, and in due time they stopped and listened beneath some rough boards which they knew formed a cabin floor.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GUN OF ORSON THE OWL.

Bob Hanley, on the sidewalk across the street from the Hotel Eden, had completely lost the wretch who had fired two shots into their room.

The ground seemed to have opened and taken the fellow in.

The old shanty was before him, and, gripping his revolver more firmly he opened the door.

The cabin was dark and silent.

It was small, like all the shanties of Shakedown, and the dude stood for half a minute in the dark straining his ears for some sound of human inmates.

But not a sound was heard.

"He must have entered this shanty," the young detective decided. "He could have gone nowhere else."

In another moment Bob was violently thrown against the wall behind him; a pair of hands were at his throat. But, though thus caught, unawares, the young detective was instantly on his mettle, and, after a brief struggle, succeeded in getting away from the wall.

The hot breath of his assailant was on his cheeks, and he felt the hands relax.

"What's the use o' fighting me? I don't want your life, boy," was what he heard said.

"You seem to be after it, all the same," retorted Bob.

"Do I? Why, I could have taken it, a while ago. I saw you at the window, and I never saw the day I purposely missed a man at that distance."

"Why, then, did you shoot?"

"To fetch you over here. I knew you would come, for you have grit. Now let us talk. We need a light, but not just yet. Shakedown is still awake, and on the alert. You don't know me; I am Billy Whiskers."

"You—you the sweet singer of Shakedown?"

"Yes, in my assumed role," was the reply. "Do I look weak and is my voice a little cracked, as when I sing in The Comet for Mountain Kidd and pards? I don't possess the elixir of life nor the wine of old age. I know that I have an incurable malady, but at times I am as strong as a lion and that's now. Where's Nelly?"

"At home, I presume."

"Good! And Kidd?"

"You ought to know about as much of him as I do. He is suffering from Jerusalem Jake's bullet."

"Did you see it—the shooting?"

"Yes."

"It was a little cowardly on Jerusalem's part, wasn't it?"

"Rather cowardly. Mountain Kidd had barely time to turn when the revolver dropped him."

"Of course. It's Jerusalem's way. The man has been shooting that way for years. He'll get it the same way, some day. But let that go. What have you found out?"

"We are on the trail."

"And you expect to find the hand that killed the Unknown and left him by the white rock for Alkali Tom?"

"That's what we came to Shakedown for."

For a moment Billy Whiskers was silent; then, in a whisper, he spoke:

"Listen to me. Drop the case!"

"We can't do that. There's too much at stake."

"Drop the matter, now and forever."

"It cannot be. We did not come to Shakedown to be driven out by its toughs. We are called the Boy Dudes of Briggs City, sometimes called the Doomed Camp. We are neither dudes nor toughs, but we are men with a mission, and great wrongs to avenge."

"I guess we'll have a light, after that," was the answer, and a match was drawn across the wall.

The little light showed Bob the singer's face and his intensely eager eyes.

"See here. You're not alone in this battle to clear up a mystery, for others are with you," Billy went on. "You must face the banded toughs of Shakedown. They're not regularly organized, but a strange brotherly sentiment unites them. Orson the Owl is the main one, for, though Mountain Kidd is called the king of the camp, it really is Orson who directs things. The one-armed terror of the Mariposa Range is a man to be feared."

"I have studied the fellow," answered Bob. "I have watched his movements, and I know something of the character of the man."

"But you only went skin deep," assumed Billy Whiskers. "Under the skin lies the real Orson, the deep plotter and the cool demon. Why, Mountain Kidd is

but clay in the one hand of this man Orson."

Billy went to the door, and, opening it carefully, he listened.

"Did you hear?" he asked, turning to Bob. "Orson went past the shanty just then."

"He suspects, then?"

"When did he ever cease to suspect? He is always at it. You found his letter. I saw you glide away from Orson's post-office, and when I went to the stone the message was gone. He is looking for it now."

"And suspects you, Billy?"

"Perhaps. He knows I bear him no good will. How could I when that one hand orphaned me?"

"Orphaned you?" cried Bob.

"Just so. It was a cruel bit of work, but for all the world like Orson the Owl."

"Why haven't you avenged that crime?"

"Wait!" and the voice of Billy Whiskers dropped again to a whisper. "I want the secret first—the secret, then the avenging! Yes, he made me what I am—the strange man of Shakedown—the singer of this accursed camp."

"Will he come back?" asked Bob.

"I don't know. Perhaps not. He has missed the letter under the stone. Did you fetch it with you?"

"I have it here," said Bob, producing the message, and Billy, stepping to the taper on the rough deal table, began to read.

For several minutes the song-bird was silent.

"That's just like Orson the Owl," he at length spoke. "That message was intended for the others. He dared not meet them in camp, but they come in one by one every night for orders."

"Who are they?"

"The outlaws of the other side of the hills. They are the men of Blackheart Camp—the desperadoes of the old plains. They are forbidden by law to show themselves in Shakedown during the day on account of their crimes, but, night after night you can find them flitting from cabin to cabin or see them with Orson in secret consultation. This letter means danger and death. It means that tonight, unless something happens, the blow intended by the One-armed will surely fall."

"Then," said Bob, laying his hand on Billy Whiskers' arm, "then it will not fall," and, pocketing the letter, Bob turned to leave, to report his adventure to his pard.

"I did not hit either one of you?" asked Billy, anxiously.

"No. The bullets only spoilt two window panes and a little of Oregon Dave's wall, nothing more."

"Good!" and the singer snuffed out the light.

"You will find me on the street tomorrow, if you see that day," remarked Billy.

Bob stepped out of the cabin.

Shakedown seemed asleep, and the strange quietude seemed to presage disaster.

Crossing the street, the dude entered the Hotel Eden and proceeded at once to his room.

"Back again, in good shape!" he said, as he opened the door.

There was no response, and Bob looked around the dimly lighted room for his pard.

"Glad to hear it," said a voice. "I've been waiting for you, boy."

It was not Ben's voice nor was it his cousin who stood in the middle of the little room.

Bob saw before him a man whose figure was power itself, and whose one arm told him who was the man he faced.

It was Orson, the Owl—Orson, the One-armed!

His face darkly savage looked more ferocious in the uncertain light, and his voice had the cruel harshness of the desperado.

"I'd begun to git a little impatient," asserted the man; "but you're back and that's enough. I'll take my letter."

The astonished dude sharply scrutinized the desperado, and thought of Billy Whiskers' estimate of Orson's character.

"Come! I'll take my letter—the one you took from beneath the stone. Letter-thieving may do in the Doomed Camp, but it won't work in Shakedown. My letter, you young baboon, or I'll paint Oregon Dave's room with your brains!"

Up came the single arm and the revolver into which Bob looked seemed to have a magnified muzzle.

"The letter or death!"

CHAPTER X.

THE STORY IN THE SHANTY.

Bob Hanley, though thus menaced by the One-armed, stood like one who did not fear the desperado.

"Hand it over or there'll be another tenant of the little cemetery on the hill," was ejaculated.

Bob heard voices in the room below, but Ben did not come.

Oregon Dave was waiting on some customers, and was chatting with them, perhaps about the events of the day.

Suddenly Orson dropped his arm, and bounding to the window gazed intently down upon the street over the sloping roof.

A moment only; then he turned for the door.

"Some other time," he said. "We meet again. You will hear from Orson, the Owl, sooner than you care to. Good-night."

And the man with the missing hand vanished.

Bob went to the window. He beheld Orson quit the porch and join some one in the street.

"One of the men of Blackheart Camp perhaps," thought the dude, as the pair made off. "I may hear from him again, but he cannot hasten matters too much for me."

Then the queer face of Oregon Dave appeared at the door.

"Come down," the landlord said to Bob. "They want to see you."

Bob descended and walked into the presence of six men in the reception room.

The tallest one seemed to lead, and, as the young man put in appearance, he said:

"We're here in the interest of peace. We're the peaceful angels of Shakedown. Kidd is nearly gone; he wants ter see you."

"To see me?—Mountain Kidd? Not dead?"

"Yes, to see you. He is still alive."

"I will see him," replied Bob, and escorted by the Angels of Peace he walked up the street and was halted in front of a little shanty.

One of the men pushed open the door and motioned Bob to enter.

"You kin be alone with him. That's his request," said the captain. "He'll last till mornin', probably, and no one shall hear what passes between you."

Bob, closing the door behind him, advanced toward a low couch in one corner of the place, upon which lay the figure of a man.

He recognized Mountain Kidd in the faint light, and the black eyes of Shakedown's king-pin fastened themselves upon him.

"It's you, is it?" the giant said, holding out his hand. "It was a cowardly shot, but just Jake's way. You heard it all—my confession, my defiance afterward and the hot accusation. But let all that pass. I want ter see you. Is the door tight shut and no one to hear?"

"Yes," and drawing a three-legged stool beside the couch Bob waited for the dying man to proceed.

"It's pretty hard ter be shot by one's own brother," was what the dying man first spoke.

"What's that?" cried Bob, in amazement.

"Never mind. He sent the bullet home. I knew he could shoot, for I taught him—to my sorrow. Now, boy, you want the papers which old Bandy drew up; but you may have ter fight for them."

"Where are they?"

"Orson has them all—the will and the story. They straighten out the tangle; without them Nelly will be a pauper, and you can't convince the world that your story is true. Bandy made it right before he died. Nickell was a mystery which no one solved till after his death—that is, no one but me."

"You knew who he really was?"

"Yes. He was not the girl's father, but most all the camp suspected that. He died in a strange way; he war found sittin' in his chair stone dead, one night, by Alkali Tom."

"The same man who found the Unknown beside the white rock?"

"Exactly. Alkali Tom is lucky that way," smiled Mountain Kidd. "It's what you call a coincidence, eh? But this is not why I sent for you of all persons in Shakedown to-night."

Bob did not speak.

"You came down here ter find out who killed the Unknown. You say you know who he was, but you want ter know whose hand struck the last blow."

"You are right. We have an interest in that dead man and in the ground."

Mountain Kidd cast a long look at the door and seemed to collect his thoughts.

"The hull thing's strange," said he, with lowered voice. "It's been a long time comin'."

"What has?"

"These events. Look here, boy! You won't leave me if I tell you all?"

"No."

"I mean you won't go away till I'm planted."

"Of course not."

"That's good. Orson killed him!"

"Did you see it, Kidd?"

The eyes seemed to get a wild light.

"I saw it," responded Mountain Kidd, feebly, but with emphasis. "I saw it, and I'd face Orson with the story."

"Was he alone?"

"That he was. It was a cool bit o' business. He found the man alone. He was comin' ter Shakedown for a purpose, but Orson knew him on sight."

"And he wanted him out of the way?"

"Certainly. It was the work of the One-armed. For once this is a crime Pinos Jack had no hand in."

"Why did Orson want the Unknown dead?" asked Bob.

"That man would have turned some things topsy-turvy in Shakedown," answered Kidd. "He would have shown a hand which would have trumped all o' Orson's cards."

"And he a stranger to Shakedown?"

"Yes; it was the first time he ever saw the camp."

"And he was killed at the very fringe

of it! What ought to be done with the murderer, Kidd?"

The wounded sport ground his teeth and his lips met.

"Thar's no question about that," he returned. "What should become of a murderer no matter if it was a case of revenge?"

"You have resolved to betray Orson, have you?"

"Only in the interest of Justice. Justice! Ha, ha! Hear old Pinos Jack talk about the goddess! It's funny, isn't it?"

He laughed in a manner that made Bob shudder.

"I'll face Orson with my testimony if you can arrest him before it's too late," he went on. "The camp will believe a dyin' pard when it comes to that. Orson is playin' a high hand for big stakes. With the will in his possession and the Unknown out o' the way, why, he's right in it."

"Bring the gun here!" he requested. "They took it away from me awhile ago, when I talked flighty like. It's over thar on the shelf. I'm all right now."

Bob took the sport's revolver from a shelf just beyond his reach and laid it on the couch beside him.

Mountain Kidd hid it eagerly under the dirty bed-clothes and then looked wistfully at the young ferret.

"Go out an' find him," he said. "Fetch him here, accused of the crime. Shakedown will stand by you after she's heard my story. I'll solve this mystery in a jiffy. You may find him in his shanty or with some of the men from the camp over the hills. Orson has a secret post-office somewhar in camp, but go out and find him. I'm not goin' ter be a witness-long, thanks ter Jerusalem Jake."

Mountain Kidd pushed Bob from the couch, and with a questioning glance at the stricken man the young detective walked away.

As he opened the door he caught sight of a group of men in front of The Comet and the strains of "The Miner's Last Dream" came to his ears.

"Billy is entertaining the toughs of Shakedown," thought Bob. "He has been corralled by them and—"

His sentence was broken by a man who stepped out of the shadows of Kidd's cabin.

"You're through, eh?" was asked. "War he rational? All O. K. yet?"

"Yes, yes. Where will I find Orson, the Owl?"

"Over thar. He has got Billy Whiskers ter sing one o' his songs for the men of Blackheart Camp."

"Are they here?"

"Yes, ten or more o' them."

Looking at the crowd in front of The Comet, Bob took in the dangerous scene at a glance.

"What do you want with Orson?" asked the Shakedown "Angel."

"I want to see him. I have business with him."

"Not while they are with him, I hope."

"Yes; now or never."

The other laid his hand on Bob's arm and leaned toward him as he said:

"Didn't Kidd put yer up ter it all, boy? Wasn't it his request? It's the old feud—the old quarrel over the little mine they opened years ago."

"I can't help that," was Bob's rejoinder. "I want to see Orson, the Owl."

"If you must you shall," was the answer. "You shall see him now; but remember, if you rouse him you can't expect help from the Angels of Peace."

With his hand on his revolver the dude walked toward The Comet, while the voice of Billy Whiskers sounded the chorus of the pathetic song.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CRISIS IN THE DRAMA.

Meantime in another part of Shakedown at precisely the same hour a scene of a different nature was taking place.

Could Nelly, the heiress, have seen the interior of her little house she would have seen one of the boards of the floor move upward and a human head appear.

A moment more and a man crept into view; and then another, Samson, the hermit of Heart-of-Gold Mine, turned upon his companion.

"This is the child's nest," he said, in low tones. "It's the best kept one in Shakedown, and she's as neat as a pin. They would rob her of it all. They would make her walk from Shakedown as poor as a spear of alkali grass, but they shan't, eh?"

"They shall not," avowed Jerusalem Jake, decisively. "Now for the other shanty, Samson."

"Yes. I said I would lead you to Orson's crib, and you shall search it for the stolen papers."

Samson took a look outside and reported that he could see nothing but a crowd of toughs in front of The Comet, with Billy Whiskers as entertainer, and the two agreed that the time for the visit to Orson's shanty was most opportune.

Soon both were in front of the place.

It did not take the men long to effect an entrance, and when they stood within they drew close together.

"No light," said Samson. "We must have the eyes of owls."

"That's right. What we can't find tonight without a light must remain hidden."

For ten minutes they searched the interior, but fruitlessly.

"Not found," said Jake.

"No. It's queer. It was his track in the dust; that I know. Orson stole the documents, but I can't turn 'em up here. We must try again."

The second search resulted as the first: nothing discovered.

"What's that?" suddenly asked Jerusalem, laying his hand on his revolver. "Hist!"

Both listened in the dark to a noise at the door.

The door was pressed with caution and some one entered.

The men had glided to one corner.

"It's the girl," whispered Samson.

"If it is Nelly, she must not find us here," was the reply. "Let her find the documents herself, but not discover us."

"I'll look for the papers," said a voice in the dark. "I'm afraid to strike a light, for fear of Orson, but I'll search his nest without one."

They heard her moving hither and thither in the cramped abode of the one-armed sport, on the side opposite from where they stood, and while she worked Samson and Jerusalem Jake held their breath.

"What's these?—papers?" was suddenly exclaimed. "These must be the documents stolen from Heart-of-Gold Mine. I have them at last, at last!—the will and the proofs!"

"Gods! her eyes or fingers beat ours," ejaculated Samson Peters at his companion's ears. "Who'd have thought it? Let her go! If she keeps them they'll answer the same purpose."

They heard the door open, but, immediately, it was shut again and Nelly drew back.

"I'll wait till he passes," they heard

her murmur, and the little shanty was quiet once more.

Footsteps passed and Nelly looked out, following a dark form with her keen orbs.

"Come!" said Jake. "If Orson should return and find us here—"

"He shall never do that. We will go."

Nelly had disappeared. Hugging her find to her bosom, the waif of the Mariposa ran to her own shanty and entered.

Hurriedly lighting her lamp, she set it on the floor underneath the window, so as not to let the beams reach the street.

The door she had secured with a wooden slide.

She sat down, breathless, still and excited, and taking the documents from their hiding place she opened the package.

"These are the ones. I see the dust of the old mine on every one. These are the papers he took from Samson Peters. How lucky! They're the very papers the two young men would like to see. But, what is their story?"

She fell to reading the first one.

"The Last Will and Testament of Bandy Nickell, so-called."

Nelly stopped and looked up. Her face was pale and her eyes eager, despite their weird light.

"I bequeath to my adopted daughter, Nelly, the whole of Heart-of-Gold Mine with the nuggets in the secret chamber pointed out by the diagram accompanying this will. Unto her care I also give the other documents which are here found, and which tell the story of her birth and her parents' history."

Nelly paused. She was on the threshold of a secret and did not have the heart to proceed.

"Shall I go on?" the girl questioned. "My parentage is here revealed. Here is the story of my father and mother and their names."

"I dare not—not now! I am not strong enough," she went on. "He wrote this for me, but I will not read the story to-night," so, folding the papers again, she again hid them in her dress.

She went out and stood in the shadow of the cabin, listening for what she might hear, and looking toward The Comet, she seemed to see the crowd there scatter.

"Let him have his say," she heard Orson cry out. "This is a free-for-all camp, and even the boy dude from the North shall have fair play."

She flitted down the street and stopped near the crowd.

"Stand back! Let him stand out fairly and say it," ordered the One-armed terror.

Then the girl took in the situation.

Bob Hanley stood before the Owl, straight as an arrow and erect.

"I do accuse you, in the presence of Shakedown," said the young trailer, calmly, "and say that you killed the Unknown found by Alkali Tom at the foot of the white rock, and will prove it by a competent witness."

"A witness, eh? Trot him out!"

"Where is the sheriff of Shakedown?" asked Bob, looking around.

"Here!" and the man stepped forward.

"The murderer of the Unknown stands yonder, in the person of Orson, the One-armed!" averred the young detective. "The man he killed was known in other places as Diamond Donald—"

"My God! it cannot be!"

Nelly stood in the middle of the road. It was she who spoke.

"Diamond Donald, as he was called, came to Shakedown on an important mission, but Orson met him at the edge of the camp. Proof he wants and proof he shall have. Will the sheriff take the accused into custody?"

The officer did not move.

"Here I am!" said Orson. "Take me! I am your prisoner, sheriff. I am under arrest for the murder of the man called Diamond Donald. But remember, boy! There must be positive proof, for to fail in that is death to you, after this charge."

The girl stepped forward, but some one kindly pushed her back, and the people of Shakedown surged toward the middle of the road.

"Whar's yer witness?" demanded Orson, with confidence. "Produce him I say!"

"Come with me!" exclaimed Bob. "From his lips ere he dies you shall hear the true story of that crime by the white stone."

Bob Hanley led the crowd toward Mountain Kidd's shanty.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WOUNDED WITNESS.

In his little cabin awaited Mountain Kidd, his eyes fixed intently upon the door.

All at once he caught the tread of the advancing mob.

The footsteps soon halted at the door, and then came a moment of silence, as Bob Hanley laid his hand on the latch.

Mountain Kidd had raised himself on the cot, but he did not seem to breathe.

The door opened and the half-glazed eyes of the man on the pallet seemed for a moment to get a lively light.

"Here's the witness, gentlemen!"

The opening of the shanty door flooded the cabin with moonlight, and the faces that were pushed forward paused at the threshold.

The Owl stepped inside, looked at Mountain Kidd, and then turned to the men at his back:

"Examine the witness!" he said, with confidence.

Kidd had not said a word. His face was ghastly now; the man was nearly gone.

The young detective sprang to the couch and took the hand lying on the coverlet.

"We are here," said he. "I have accused Orson, and he is here, defying me to produce proof against him."

Mountain Kidd heard the words, but seemed unable to answer.

"Lift him up!" said the sheriff.

"Don't touch him! Let him take his time. No man shall interfere with this witness!" cried Orson, fiercely. "Stand back and give him air!"

The crowd now in the shanty moved aside and the cool air of night came in and touched Mountain Kidd's cheek.

But the man's color did not change; it seemed, rather, to become fixed in its pallor.

All at once Nelly, the waif, came into the cabin and sprang to the sport's side.

"Take the girl away," fairly howled the One-armed. "She shall not tamper with the witness."

"If you dare!" was the prompt reply, as Nelly faced the desperado. "I will speak to him. I will bring him back to life if I can. He shall tell what he knows."

Nelly bent over the man on the bed; she smoothed back his matted hair, and then she spoke to him.

"It is Nelly, Mountain Kidd," said she in soft tones. "They don't want you to

talk, but you will speak, won't you, for all are here to listen!"

Something was thrust into Nelly's hands, and in another moment she was moistening the dying man's lips with spirits.

The strong liquor had a startling effect, for Kidd's eyes seemed to get back their gleam, and he looked round the place more than half intelligibly.

"Wait! He will talk in a minute," urged the girl. "Mountain Kidd is coming around all right."

The crowd waited in silence.

Mountain Kidd sat up in bed, and his face got back some of its natural color.

"Where is he?" he asked, looking at Bob Hanley.

"Here!" and Orson stepped forward.

Kidd was taken by surprise, and for half a minute his eyes rested on the man before him.

"Tell what you know! Don't keep anything back," continued Orson. "This is no regular court, but you can give in your testimony now. Don't keep anything back."

At the same time he leaned over the couch, and a word which the others but imperfectly heard fell, in a whisper, from his lips.

Instantly over the face of the dying man a startling change came. Kidd fell back and for a second appeared to gasp for breath.

"Go on!" commanded Orson. "Tell it all, Mountain Kidd!"

There was no reply. Kidd only looked at the crowd and seemed to shiver.

"You will be heard through," assured Bob Hanley. "You remember what you told me."

"Give him time. I'm satisfied. No man shall coach the witness!" roared Orson. "It is my life that's at stake and he is your witness."

Silent still lay the man on the pallet, his lips now and then moving, but not a word falling from them.

"Speak! It is for justice!" cried Nelly. "It is in my interest, too! If you saw the crime committed, if you know who killed the Unknown at the white rock, in the name of heaven do not keep it back!"

A mighty effort seemed to stir the man on the couch; he raised himself to his elbow, but avoided the gaze of Orson.

"Silence!" cried the girl. "It is coming now. The witness is struck with death, but heaven will hold the monster back until he has spoken."

Mountain Kidd took a long breath; his gaze wandered round the room.

"I saw it," he said. "I was hidden near by, behind the last cabin. The Unknown came from the hills, walking with his head bent down and seeing no one. Suddenly a man sprang from behind the white rock, and the next instant the stranger was struck."

Mountain Kidd paused a moment, but quickly resumed, amid intense silence:

"It didn't take long for the work. In a jiffy there was a dead man on the ground."

A thrill of horror seemed to shiver through Nelly's nerves.

"You saw all this, Mountain Kidd?" she cried.

The witness nodded.

"Why didn't you interfere?"

"I could not; it was all over in such a short time. After the killing the murderer stooped over the Unknown and seemed to search the body."

"Taking away all signs of identification," explained the girl. "And well he succeeded!"

"Yes, yes," replied the witness. "I

saw him vanish, and when I went up, the stranger lay on his back, staring at the stars."

Mountain Kidd fell back on the couch and his face got darker than ever.

"But the murderer?" demanded the girl. "You have not named him!"

"You named him to me," added Bob. "You called him by name in this very house to-night."

"Let him take his time," spoke Orson. "The witness will tell if he knows who the slayer was. Who killed the Unknown, Mountain Kidd?"

Kidd turned full upon the man.

"It's a case of life and death," continued the Owl. "It means a good deal for the guilty and just as much for the innocent."

"I tell the truth. I—don't know—who—did—it!" was the dying man's statement.

The silence was almost palpable. Nelly looked at Bob, and Orson and his pards seemed astonished.

"But you named him to the young man from the Doomed Camp!" suddenly cried Nelly. "You told him—Great God! Mountain Kidd is dead!"

She recoiled from the little couch with a gasp.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SONG THAT DISPLEASED.

Orson marched down the street with the men from Blackheart Camp behind him. They were hilarious, and their laughter came back to the ears of the little group remaining in Mountain Kidd's shanty.

"What made him change his mind?" asked the girl.

"Heaven knows! Orson spoke to him in a whisper; that, I am sure."

"Intimidated Mountain Kidd; he was forced to silence by some strange power which Orson held over him."

"It is a mystery," replied the girl.

"They will celebrate now, and the blow will fall upon you two pards. Orson never forgets nor forgives. He is simply Orson, the Merciless."

"Tom's back," spoke a voice at the door.

"Alkali Tom?" and Nelly bounded to the door.

"Yes. I just saw him enter the old shanty," said Billy Whiskers, pointing toward a shanty some distance down the street.

Nelly rushed from the dead man's cabin.

"He must be seen before Orson can find him," she exclaimed.

She quickly gained a door, upon which she pounded in her eagerness.

"Come in!" called out a gruff voice, and the waif stood before the returned tough.

"Mountain Kidd is dead," she explained. "They were examining him when he died, and he said he didn't know who killed the Unknown."

"What's that?—Mountain dead?—Said he didn't know who did it? Why, Nell, what's happened since the findin'?"

In a few words the girl told the story of the accusation and the events which had followed Tom's going away.

"He saw it done, did he?"

"So he told Bob Hanley, the young man from Briggs City. That's what secured the arrest of Orson."

"Warn't the boy afraid to tackle the One-armed?"

"He was not. He accused him in the presence of the Blackhearts and the sheriff took Orson to the dying man."

A troubled expression came to Alkali's face.

"It's bad business, Nell, the sudden dyin' is, I mean," said he. "They might have believed Mountain Kidd under the circumstances. Did Orson get to see him in private?"

"No, but he said something to him in a whisper."

"No one heard it?"

"No one but Mountain Kidd."

"That was it! He turned the witness by a word. It is the work of the old clan, which those men belonged to years ago; but it exists no longer."

"It must have been something of the kind. What he said certainly did silence Mountain Kidd."

"Who all knows I'm in camp?" he asked.

"Only those now at the shanty."

"Then there's hope yet," encouraged Tom. "In the first place, girl, it's a chance, one in a hundred. Mountain Kidd may speak, though he's dead!"

"How? I don't comprehend!"

"Leave that to me."

"But does everything depend on his testimony?"

"Not quite," and the slender figure of Alkali Tom seemed to lengthen in the light of his little shanty. "I must see the dead man alone. I must see him now!"

"That can be arranged. In ten minutes at the furthest the shanty will be at your disposal."

In a short time Alkali Tom might have been seen entering the shanty occupied by the dead, and cautiously closing the door behind him.

At The Comet a lot of men were celebrating Orson's victory.

At one end of the counter stood Orson, his armless sleeve hanging at his side and his dark face a little flushed and full of bravado.

He leaned on the end of the counter, listening to a speech from a bearded Blackheart who had mounted a table in the middle of the room and was extolling Orson as one of the "whitest men under the sun."

The crowd applauded; the men of Shakedown clapped their hands, and the toughs from beyond the hills followed suit. It was a wild, exciting scene, for the men for the most part were clad in check shirts and were dark-faced and bearded like true mountain denizens.

In the very heart of the Blackheart's laudation the door opened and there slipped into the place the diminutive figure of Billy Whiskers. Seeing the situation, he quietly sought a corner and listened.

If he hoped that his presence in The Comet would pass unnoticed, he was speedily undeceived, for all at once some one called for a song, and another sport pulled Billy forward.

Billy Whiskers was asked to improvise.

He did this sometimes, though his rhymes on such occasions might be crude and the metre limp. Still the toughs liked his improvisations, and he could rattle them off when in the proper humor.

"Give us suthin' new, Billy," cried half a dozen voices. "Don't go back to history, but come down ter date. You've got plenty of material just now, so sail in and let us have something good."

Billy Whiskers stood near the counter, but carefully avoided looking at Orson, as he began.

The hush was perfect. The toughs in their heavy boots no longer kept time to the song as it poured from the singer's

throat, and the stanzas produced a sensation.

"There came a man to a mountain camp,
A man whose hair was gray;
But a guilty villain lurked for him
Where the cooling shadows lay;
'Tis said no human eye was there
The crimson deed to see;
But justice soon will swing the wretches
From Shakedown's gallows tree."

"He died that night, the poor old man,
Afar from friends and home,
And yet the one who struck him down
Among us still doth roam;
Let vengeance smite the villain down,
Though there was none to see,
And let the vultures find his bones
Upon the gallows tree."

Billy paused and looked around the room.

The face of the One-armed had changed color.

"That's enough!" he cried. "This isn't the time nor the place for such tomfoolery."

But Billy did not mind the protest, and in another moment his voice was soaring again.

"Stop!" thundered the One-armed, rising at the end of the counter.

"Let him sing," insisted some one in the rear of the crowd. "He's struck something new an'—"

The Owl strode forward, with face aflame, and his six-shooter was thrust into the singer's face.

"Silence or death!" cried the ruffian.

Billy desisted. His consumptive-like figure seemed to edge away from the counter and his eyes got a strange light.

"If you dare!" cried another voice, at this juncture. "Shoot the songbird of Shakedown and you follow him before he touches the floor!"

The One-armed glanced toward this speaker, and those who followed his eye saw standing near the door, with a lifted revolver which covered the One-armed tough, Nelly, the waif of the Mariposa!

"Sing it through, Billy!" she commanded.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LIVING DEAD.

Billy Whiskers, thus adjured, resumed his song, amid the startling stillness.

He finished, and with a glance of triumph at Orson, came forward and touched Nelly's arm.

"Come," said he, dropping his voice a little. "Billy has sung his last song."

The two passed from The Comet together, but beyond the door they stopped, while Billy spoke:

"They have me doomed. I know it. I felt it before I entered The Comet; but I wanted to sing for Orson and his gang. Where is Alkali Tom?"

Nelly pointed toward Tom's shanty and Billy at once slipped away, while the girl turned homeward.

"Nelly?" called some one behind her, and she stopped at the door of her house, to see in the light the stalwart shadow thrown by a man.

"You, Jerusalem?" she exclaimed as he advanced. "You back again? Do you know he is dead?" and the alarmed waif drew the man inside and shut the door.

Then she lit her little lamp and set it on the table. Explanations followed and Nelly then took the package from her bosom and handed it to him.

"Ar' they all here?" asked Jake, "and you have read them?"

"I read only the will. I did not have the courage to read the other."

"I see. It tells the story of your parents."

"Read it and say if I should look it over," requested the girl.

Jake opened the last named document and bent over it, watched eagerly by the silent girl.

She saw, by the change that came to his face, that he was excited.

Jake did not speak until he had finished the last line, and even then for a moment he remained silent.

"It's all here, Nelly," said he, finally.

"All?" asked the girl. "Should I read it?"

"Yes, but not just now. It's a strange story. Bandy was a strange man—a human mystery, but he knew how to tell the story. He kept nothing back. All is revealed; even the identity of the Unknown found dead by the white rock."

Nelly started and caught the paper from her friend's hands.

"I would know that. I merely glanced over the writing and saw somewhere the name of Diamond Donald strangely connected with my own."

"It is thus connected in several places. Diamond Donald was a singular man. He had a history which is here given—a history which Nickell knew so well."

"I will not read the paper now," decided the waif. "Wait until this drama is played out. Listen!"

Both Nelly and Jake sprang to the door and held it open, listening to a sound akin to the roar of wild beasts, which came up the street.

Jerusalem drew his weapon and let it rest along his leg.

"Down with the man who killed Mountain Kidd!" rose the cry, soaring aloft like a shout of vengeance.

"That means me. They know I'm in town. They're heading for this very shanty. The street seems full of 'em. Look, Nelly!"

"Oh, oh, Jerusalem! Why did you come back?" she exclaimed piteously.

"What will you do—what can you do?"

"I can give 'em all the slip without goin' out the door," he smiled.

"You cannot escape!" she declared.

"Oh, what can I do?"

"Don't worry, little woman. I'm safe enough. You don't know the secret passage which leads to the Heart-of-Gold Mine. That is one of the things Bandy never imparted to you, child," he explained.

"Death to the man from Caleveras!" rang out on the night air.

The crowd in the street halted.

It had sighted another victim, for some one bounded toward the nearest shanty, as if in pursuit of some one flitting in the shadows there.

"It's Billy Whiskers! He is in the hands of his old foe!" cried Nelly.

She flung the door wide now and stepped out, but Jerusalem held her back.

The Singer of Shakedown indeed had fallen into bad hands, for he had been dragged forward, and the ruffians, led by Orson, hemmed him round.

The little man looked into the fierce faces of his enemies without flinching, and stood his ground, but he was suddenly jerked off his feet and thrown into the air by half a dozen hands.

Nelly uttered a scream at the songbird's danger and looked at her companion.

"Billy is doomed," she moaned. "Orson wants vengeance for that last song."

The upthrown Billy had fallen back into the crowd and the whole set of ruffians seemed to fall upon him.

Nelly jerked from Jake's grasp and ran forward.

As she approached, the mob separated and on the ground where it had done its work lay a motionless figure, and the desperadoes saw her bend over the songbird of Shakedown while they looked on with uncompassionate eyes.

"Finish the Man from Caleveras next!" shouted Orson. "There must be none of them left by morning. This is our night, and Shakedown shall witness the triumph!"

"Down with him! Death to Jerusalem Jake! Long live Orson, the One-armed King of Mariposa!"

A figure which the desperadoes did not see slipped back into Nelly's house and shut the door.

The mob swept past.

In the moonlight stood the Hotel Eden, with the form of its proprietor on the porch, and Oregon Dave seemed to guess the intentions of the band.

"Tell him we're here!" cried Orson, authoritatively, halting in front of the place. "He's with you, we know, for he came out awhile ago. Our spy saw him!"

"He is not here. Jerusalem Jake, if he is the man you're looking for, is not under my roof."

"You lie! Fetch him out!"

Oregon Dave backed to the door, but half a dozen men leaped upon the porch and faced him with drawn weapons.

"Search the house!" ordered Orson.

"Search it it is! Forward!" shouted the gang.

The men of the two camps, led by the One-armed Sport, poured into the barroom.

This proved a little too tempting for the band, and some sprang over the counter, pushing Dave back into a corner and holding him there with menacing threats.

In a jiffy bottles and glasses vanished and the crowd dashed toward the stairs.

"He's up there," averred Orson. "He was seen to enter here within an hour. Drag him down!"

The old staircase creaked beneath the heavy tread of the mob, but the men pressed on.

In another moment the foremost would have been at the top, but for an unexpected event.

Suddenly some one fell back, with a cry that drove those below him further down, and the gang stood once more in the barroom without knowing what had taken place.

"Don't let one man beat you back!" urged Orson. "Stand back and let me take him."

He sprang to the door and then to the stairs, his face aflame with passion.

He was three steps up the flight when he, too, paused and reeled against the wall.

"Merciful heavens! Has the dead come to life?" he almost moaned, as he stood like one struck breathless by some apparition from spiritland.

His hand fell nerveless at his side and the six-shooter gripped by it nearly dropped from his grasp.

The figure on the stairway advanced, with eyes of steely gray, fastened upon the ruffian chief. It did not speak, but the desperado did not wait. He leaped down the steps, halted a moment in the barroom, and then, his face as white as a cloth, he dashed from the house.

The others followed.

"It was the dead!" cried Orson, looking back at Hotel Eden. "It was Diamond Donald, the man planted yesterday on the hill!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE CYCLONE FROM CALEVERAS.

The apparition of the hotel had frightened more than Orson, and the men of the camp discussed it in lowered voice.

As for the "ghost," it stood in a little room just beyond the stairs and looked into the faces of the Two Dudes from the Doomed Camp.

Was it Samson, the mine-hermit? It certainly was!

With folded arms the dark-faced man leaned against the table and talked.

"I look like Diamond Donald who, as you tell me, is the Unknown—the murdered victim of the white rock? Well, young men, I ought to look like him. He was my brother, and the secret of Samson, the mine-hermit, is out. No wonder Orson fled from me. We separated early in life, my brother and I, and I never found his trail until lately. The will and document left by Bandy Nickell told the true story of my brother's life after we parted, and when I read it in the light of my fire, in Heart-of-Gold Mine, I knew that I had found the last link of a family mystery."

Bob Hanley had listened intently to Samson and then spoke.

"Now for our secret," said he. "We two came down from the Doomed Camp to find a man named Robert Minan. You did not hear Larry accuse me of being his son the first night we struck camp?"

"I did not."

"The accusation went through me like a knife. It nearly sent me off my feet, for it was true!"

"You are a Minan, then?"

"Yes, the only child of the Robert Minan who, years ago, lived in this part of the world, and in more than one camp ruled things with a rod of iron. But they have told me that, while he was a tyrant, he ruled honestly. I remember him when a child, but all at once he vanished from my life, and after that I have no record of him. The description of the murdered man which came to the Doomed Camp after the finding, by Alkali Tom, convinced Ben and me that he was my father; hence our mission to Shakedown."

The man at the table smiled.

"For once," said he, "you are wrong. The dead man was called Diamond Donald. He could not have been Robert Minan."

"But marks which my father carried on his person were on his body."

Samson seemed to start a little.

"But, let me convince you. The same marks are on *my* body," said he, and he pulled up his sleeve. "Look here!"

"It is true!" cried Ben.

"The world is full of surprises," continued Samson. "Carl and I were twins, and the marks he carried on him are on my body and in the same places."

"Then our mission is a fruitless one," remarked Bob.

"Not quite. You have discovered the murderer."

"On the word of a dead man who, at the last moment, retracted. Mountain Kidd died with a retraction on his lips."

"Silenced by a word from Orson," supplemented Samson, bitterly. "This man knew his power and used it. Even with the shadow of death over him Mountain Kidd went back on his word."

"Yes. Without other proof it is impossible to convict Orson."

"Leave him to me. Let me play out my hand. The time has nearly come."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs and the waif burst into the room.

"Billy! Quick!" she called. "They have caught him again!"

"Come then," from Samson, excitedly. He was on the war-path, and with the others at his heels, he dashed from the hotel, the girl catching up with him as he ran.

Suddenly there came around a cabin a figure, at sight of which both Samson and Nelly halted.

"'Tis he! Jerusalem!" cried the girl.

"Let him go. He is for Hotel Eden, but we are for the toughs of The Comet, with Billy in their hands."

The little party halted in front of the resort, now strangely quiet beyond the door.

"Let me look in," said Nelly. "Let me investigate first."

She opened the door and looked inside, to behold the men of the two camps grouped in the middle of the room, where several tables had been drawn together.

The hermit of Heart-of-Gold Mine leaned forward and took a survey of the place, but in a moment drew back, just as there came down the street a cry which turned every face in that direction.

"Wait!" urged Samson. "It's Jerusalem Jake!"

In the middle of the street moved a man with the speed of eagerness, and stopped in front of The Comet.

"Come out!" he cried. "Come forth, coward of a dozen camps, and face the destroyer from Caleveras! Death to the murderer of Diamond Donald! Down with Orson, the sneaking hyena of Shakedown!"

There was a movement beyond the door of the place and the little group at it drew back.

"Silence him," commanded Samson, and he bounded toward the man in the street.

"You, Samson? I'm in it for the last time. Where is the boss of Shakedown?"

"Wait! The toughs of the two camps are in consultation."

"I'll rouse them, then!"

Jerusalem broke from the other's grasp and, stealing forward, threw wide The Comet's door.

There was a movement within, and Jerusalem Jake shouted forth his defiance.

In another moment the voices of desperate men arose above all other sounds, and they poured into the street like a pack of wolves.

"Halt, every mother's son of you!"

There stood Jerusalem Jake, his figure seen in the light which now streamed from The Comet's lamps and in each hand a weapon.

The toughs drew back, hesitatingly.

"Whar's Billy?" demanded Jerusalem.

No one answered him, and Nelly pushed toward the den.

"He is in there!" she cried. "They took him from me and carried him into The Comet."

"One minute to produce Billy, the whip-poor-will of Shakedown!" he called out, sternly—"one minute!"

The toughs exchanged glances, but not a man moved.

"Count three slowly, Nelly," he went on. "Count the last number a little fast like. The sooner some one dies here the better."

"One—"

One of the foremost men threw up his hand.

The waif of Shakedown held her breath.

"Go on, Nell," ordered Jake.

"Two!" she said.

Some one darted back into the place and vanished.

Nelly paused once more.

Quickly the man who had entered the den reappeared, something in his arms.

"It is Billy!" cried Nelly, forgetful of her mission, but some one caught her arm.

"Here he is! He's all right, only—"

"Only what?" demanded Jerusalem Jake.

"Only he may never sing again!"

The figure held by the speaker was released and tottered forward, while Nelly, with a cry, sprang toward it and caught it tenderly in her arms.

Then came a sharp report from up the street.

Jerusalem Jake tottered in the dust and fell in a heap at the girl's feet.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HAND OF VENGEANCE.

The sudden shot startled all, and the men of the two camps hailed their master with a cheer, for it was Orson the One-armed.

But, suddenly, the hermit of the mine stepped toward the silent figure advancing and threw up his hand.

"Halt, Orson, Ivan Prince!"

The one-armed man stood still.

Samson advanced yet nearer.

"Ivan, you must die. You have finished Jerusalem Jake, but that is not the crime for which you perish."

"No. I understand."

"You must walk back with me to your shanty."

"I will not!"

"Oh, yes, you will! I am going to the shanty. Come with me, Orson! It is all over; the girl has the will and the papers."

Orson said nothing, but sullenly turned back, led by Samson to the shanty, which they at once entered.

Orson struck a light and set the lamp on the table.

"Now, what is it?" he demanded, sullenly.

"Here, sign a paper!" ordered Samson.

"To what effect?"

"You can write, Orson of Shakedown, Ivan of the old camps. You silenced the lips of Mountain Kidd by a word. You sent him into the unknown with a lie on his tongue, and all by the sign of the old band. It was years ago, Orson, and the band died out in other lands, but the tie still binds the few living members. It was this tie that silenced Mountain Kidd. But this paper must tell the truth."

The hang-dog face of the One-armed seemed to grow darker and fiercer, but Samson did not waver.

Orson pulled the paper toward him with his one hand; a pencil was placed before him.

"You can write: 'I killed Diamond Donald. I am Orson, the murderer. I wanted the will and the papers which I stole from Bandy Nickell's mine.'"

Orson looked appealingly toward the door and for half a second seemed on the point of making a break for freedom, but Samson stood between him and escape.

Suddenly he caught up the pencil and wrote on the paper held down for him by the finger of his master.

"There," he cried, shoving it toward Samson. "That's what you wanted. Now let Orson go."

The keen eyes of the hermit of Heart-of-Gold Mine scanned what had been written.

"That is all!" he said, looking up.

"Now let me go."

"Not yet! The confession first, doom afterward!" and the hermit pocketed the

folded paper. Orson seemed to summon his powers for a leap.

"I made no proviso for liberty," assured the hermit. "My brother was the man you waylaid at the white rock. I am not his ghost, though I am the living likeness of the dead. The Courts of Shakedown must deal with you."

"I understand you. The courts of Shakedown. All right," and Orson smiled derisively.

What had he to fear of the courts of Shakedown? He had organized them; he had been judge-advocate and jury, prosecutor and high sheriff. Fear their verdict now? Pah!

The two walked toward The Comet together.

The crowd saw them and looked surprisingly on.

All at once there came from one of the little groups in front of The Comet the dude, Bob Hanley.

"One thing I must now know, Orson," spoke Bob, "tell me the secret of my father's end."

Orson leaned forward. His brows contracted and his face assumed a purplish hue.

"I didn't know him," he asserted.

"You did not? Then answer me this one question: If you are Ivan Prince what became of the man you once hunted over the White Valleys? That man was Robert Minan, my father."

The desperado started and threw a look toward his men at the entrance of The Comet.

"I remember one man whom I hunted over the White Valley," he answered. "I found him, that's a fact. Your father, eh? Why, boy, when Larry called you his son you denied it!"

"Denial then was a part of my mission to Shakedown. I am the son of Minan, the gold hunter."

"Then," said Orson, pointing toward the southern confines of Shakedown, "Go out and hunt him! There are trails and trails in the White Valleys. Go! He is there."

"You refuse to disclose the secret of his death?" said Bob. "You will not reveal the truth?"

"You are young, boy. You can trail, or some one can learn you, and you know where the White Valleys are," and the One-armed moved on.

The men of the two camps fell back to let Orson walk into The Comet, the place selected by himself for the trial.

But he never crossed the threshold, for, suddenly, a little form resting until that moment upon Nelly's arm, sprang out into the light.

"Orson! Orson of Shakedown—Orson of a hundred crimes, turn and fight!" and a revolver, snatched from the holster of Bob Hanley, went up.

Orson caught sight of the fierce face in the lamplight; saw that Billy Whiskers held him at his mercy!

The shot followed quick upon the challenge; the tall figure of the man of many names and countless crimes stood quivering a second; then it pitched backward to fall outside The Comet's door.

No one stirred for a moment.

And, speechless, Billy Whiskers walked away.

Nelly ran after him and twined her arm about him, but he said nothing.

She supported the songbird to his little shanty and held open the door. She saw him stagger inside and fall, face downward, on his rude pallet and there she left him.

One hour later the body of Shakedown's last boss lay in his own cabin

and the men of Blackheart Camp had stolen home.

A little group stood beneath the roof of Oregon Dave's hotel and talked about the last act in the eventful drama.

Bob Hanley had not found his father, but was convinced from Orson's confession that he had hunted him down in the White Valleys; and Nelly, who owned the Heart-of-Gold Mine, and held the papers left by Old Bandy, knew that the Unknown was Donald—Diamond Donald—her own father, and that the hermit was her own uncle.

In the course of time Shakedown took on better garments and even changed its name.

It assumed the airs of a mountain city, and mines sprung up and flourished, but time could not blot out the deeds of Orson the One-armed, nor obscure the drama we have witnessed there.

Billy Whiskers never sang after that last signal night when he avenged one of Orson's many villainies—the death of his parent, but to the last he was nursed by Nelly, who had become the wife of Bob Hanley, while Samson, no longer the hermit, walked the streets of Shakedown, one of its noted citizens.

Grass has grown high over certain mounds in the cemetery on the hill, but one grave is kept green by tender hands, and the children of Nelly, the waif, strew with flowers the last resting place of the Unknown.

THE END.

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